UNCLE MARY

A NOVEL FOR YOUNG OR OLD

By

ISLA MAY MULLINS

P. 40

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ISLA MAY MULLINS

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UNCLE MARY

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A Novel for Young or Old

By

ISLA MAY MULLINS

Author of

"The Blossom Shop" Books,
"Tweedie," etc.

With a frontispiece in full color from a painting by

GENE PRESSLER

And other illustrations from drawings by

JOHN GOSS

THE PAGE COMPANY

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IN MEMORY OF

M. JOSEPHINE TUTT

WHOSE SKILL AND INSPIRATION AS
TEACHER OF ENGLISH
GAVE ME MY FIRST IMPULSE TOWARD
WRITING

2137297

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UNCLE MARY

CHAPTER I

FORECAST

A LITTLE group sat upon the hotel veranda of a small New England town when a stranger came out, and, looking keenly into the faces about him, said genially, "Is there room for another?" He was of medium height, well proportioned and with a smooth face upon which were written in equal proportions business interest, kindness and determination. Dark brown hair lightly touched with gray, crowned his erect, well-dressed figure.

There were rather inarticulate responses to his question, for it was nobody's special prerogative to welcome or deny; but, with an air of ready adaptation, the stranger sat easily down.

The habitual lounger at once placed the new-comer as from the West, and gave him no further interest. The others chatted more or less with the stranger, who was determined to be friendly.

Finally, one by one, the men left, or went inside as the hour for dinner approached, till only the stranger and the lounger remained. They sat in silence for a time; then the stranger turned pleasantly to the other, and asked: "Do you know anything of a little village not far from here, called Sunfield?"

"Born there," returned the lounger, laconically.

"Indeed!" exclaimed the stranger, with ingratiating pleasure; "then you must know the people well!"

" 'Tain't much to know 'em," came again curtly.

"Small town," returned the stranger, unperturbed. "Will you be so kind as to name over to me some of the old residents? I was

there once, and I would like to refresh my mind as to names."

It took some time for the lounger to make up his mind to so decided exertion, but he finally brought forth the names of a dozen or fifteen families.

"Ah," said the stranger, "they sound familiar." He asked concerning perhaps three or four families, simply inquiring how many of the family were then living, and questions of like general character. Among the names mentioned by the lounger was that of Halsey, and not a shade more of concern appeared as the stranger put the query, several times repeated, "And what members of the family are left?"

"Well, there's just the two Halsey girls, now. The old folks died and the boy ran off. Alice sets in a wheel chair all day, and Mary sews up the town with her needle, and lashes it with her tongue." The lounger was much pleased with himself over this spontaneous bit of wit.

"Is that so?" returned the stranger, and passed on to another name or two which he had noted in the lounger's list. Then the stranger, seemingly satisfied, passed in to get his dinner; and immediately after, hired a small motor run-about and set off, over the Berkshire hills, toward the little village of Sunfield.

It was a very beautiful early October evening, with a lingering touch of summer in the air. The ride was a delight, or would have been had not the stranger's mind been filled with thoughts not just to his liking. He stopped his car at last and parked it just at the edge of the village. Then he set out afoot along a roadway for some distance before he came to a semblance of sidewalk. But at last his quick step struck a beaten path; and, although it was by this time fully dark, he walked on a bit with confidence, turned in at a little gateway and thence up a brick path toward the door of a small brown cottage. The transparent draperies of the glass-paned door were

drawn back, and the approaching visitor involuntarily halted, as he looked, without obstruction, into the pleasant sitting room which was the heart of the little house. There was a wheel chair drawn up beside a center table, covered with books and papers and a bit of sewing. A quiet woman's figure, not a great many years beyond girlhood, filled the wheel chair and a quiet, attractive face bent forward listening, but not with approval, he was quick to note. His eyes went swiftly to another young woman's figure, opposite the one in the wheel chair; it was a more aggressive figure, with a face of sharpened features, a frown caught between the eyes, hair drawn tightly back, every line marking severity as she talked and gestured emphatically. The stranger might have heard what she said, had he drawn a little closer; but, instead, he suddenly turned his steps and walked with vigor back, down to the gate, along the beaten path and over the roadway to where he had parked his car. Without pause he

set it going again, over the hills to the town of the hotel and the lounger.

"I would not have believed it!" he exclaimed under his breath. "She was so—so little-girl-like, with her color coming and going just like a living, breathing rose; and shy as a wood nymph, she was—but quick to see a thing, and staunch and true as steel!" Here he paused in his rapid renewals of memory. There was the explanation: "She was quick to see a thing—and she was staunch and true as steel!" These very qualities had made her what she was, she had carried her quickness to see things, and her adherence to truth too far—under the lash of work and poverty, while the "little-girl-like roses" of joy had been cruelly crushed in the ten years since he had seen her. Could they ever by any process be restored to even a ghost of their former blooming? If not, then he—

"I'll try it," he muttered after a time, with dogged determination as he rode furiously on into the night.

CHAPTER II

A LETTER

It was one Friday morning in late October that Alice Halsey sat in her wheel chair by the center table in the living room of the little brown cottage that had been "home" to the Halsey girls all their lives. Mary sat opposite her in quite the accustomed way. But the two young women gazed at each other with tense concentration.

Mary was still holding an astonishing letter, her vigorous hand tightly gripped, all the energy of her body tensed to climax in the strained gaze of her gray-blue eyes,—as though she were trying to break into and visualize the eternal sweep of things to definitely explain, interpret and forecast the outcome of this astounding thing which had come to them.

Alice, in her chair, bent to her sister,

startled and helpless, her delicate face full of conflicting things, her tapering fingers tightly interlaced. The two had already gone through the first state of amazement, which even the unopened envelope had started, with its post mark, "New York City," and return address of a prominent bank there whose name was familiar to them. Then they had passed on through three excited readings of the letter; but, when Mary's eyes came back to earth, Alice urged once more, "Read it again!"

And Mary began instantly, just as though she were used to obeying orders, which was far from the truth:

Miss Mary Halsey,
Sunfield, Mass.,
My dear Miss Halsey:—

A little girl of five years and delightful personality, of which you only receive a dim impression from enclosed photograph, has been committed to us with instructions that she be sent at once to you. She is an orphan with no near relatives, and she is entrusted to you for an unlimited time with a bank account here upon which you may draw three thousand dollars per year. You will please report here the

"FOR ANSWER MARY GAVE HER A LOOK THAT WAS ALL-SUFFICIENT"

first of each month as to her health. Accordingly, Miss Elizabeth Lee Starling, properly attended, is on her way, will arrive at your nearest station, Barringer, on the early morning train of Saturday, and an hour later by taxi at your door.

Hoping this will meet your pleasure, we are,

Respectfully yours,

Mary's hand dropped with some relaxation after the fourth reading, and Alice, with lips that quivered, ventured to give expression to the exclamation which had been upon them from the first reading:

"It is Elwood's child!"

"Never," returned Mary vehemently. "If I thought so, I would send her straight back—I would wire them that on no account would I take her!"

"Mary!" exclaimed Alice with deprecating agitation, "it is wicked for you to feel as you do!"

For answer Mary gave her a look that was all-sufficient. The subject of Elwood had been tensely forbidden by Mary many years before, and the look was simply an

electric warning that the ban had not been lifted.

There was intense silence for several moments, then Alice asked, with repressed emotion, the impossible question: "Whose child is it?"

Mary turned upon her with almost fierceness: "I don't know, and I don't care!"

"Of course you are not going to take her, then," Alice ventured again, with relief.

"Yes, but I am," with cool intensity returned Mary; "and to-morrow is Saturday, so there is no time to lose in getting ready for her."

There was an immediate return of Mary's accustomed energy. Something must be done, and she was on normal ground. Alice relaxed correspondingly and determined to talk, whatever Mary might answer. This was too astonishing a thing to keep silent over.

"Well, if you are going to take the child, what are you going to say to people? The letter does not tell you anything."

"I shall tell people nothing—just exactly nothing, which is all I know."

"Mary, you can't do that!"

"You just wait and see," said Mary evenly.

"But," Alice would persist, "why don't you write the bank and ask them to tell you something about her, and why she is sent to you?"

"Because, in the first place, I don't want to know; and in the second, what time is there to write—she is on her way, now, probably. More than all that, this letter is of the final variety. It says as plainly as words could that no more is to be told me."

"You could telegraph them not to send her," Alice put in at last desperately.

"But I am not going to," Mary reiterated firmly, "for I *want her;* and, as I said before, I don't care to know where she comes from. Now I am going to work to get ready for her."

In one astonishing hour Mary Halsey had passed from the typical New England

spirit, which demands minute information in any matter of moment, to the freedom of the idealist, who mounts the wings of opportunity and looks not to the cords which have hitherto bound him. And could Alice have seen into Mary's heart at that moment, she would have realized that her sister had long been a being altogether unknown to her, though they had lived their lives together, and for ten years had lived alone,—so close that they almost breathed together, their friends would have said.

"But, Mary, think!" Alice came again, as Mary started for the door; "we can't take care of a little child!" And Alice's cheeks grew pink with agitation. "We don't know how, and I—" her voice trailed off as her helplessness came over her with a weight she had never known before.

"We are women," returned Mary laconically.

"Oh,—I know—but your sewing—"

"She can be company for you—or I will manage that when the time comes," Mary

added, realizing suddenly that children were not always desirable company for helpless people.

It did not occur to either of them then that the letter had said there was to be at Mary's command three thousand dollars a year. And if it had, they would have felt that this sum was to be spent only for the child, never realizing that the child's needs would necessarily include theirs, and that the money was Mary's to spend to make the home a suitable place for the child, and that she must give up sewing in order to do this. It took a later letter to make all this plain.

Mary determined now to end all further talk and said with emphatic finality, "I am going up attic to get ready for her."

Alice wanted dreadfully to ask what Mary was going to do, but she knew that she had gone the limit with questions, so without a word more she let Mary stride from the room to the stairs which led from the kitchen to the attic.

With what impatience Alice waited for

some sign as to what Mary was doing upstairs, can only be guessed. How she longed to go, too! "It was dreadful to have to sit still when exciting things were going on," was a plaint that Alice rarely allowed herself to make. Then her nervous hands instinctively reached for the wheels with a movement that was full of unconscious grace, while the chair swung aimlessly around and around the table which occupied the center of this combination sitting and dining room. Mary was gone exasperattingly long, and how could Alice know that every other moment Mary was hungrily devouring the little pictured face which the letter had enclosed!

"What is Mary doing?" she said to herself, again and again. But finally the firm steps were coming down the stairs, not rapidly, but with steady care, and, with flushed face and eyes alight, Mary soon appeared in the doorway with an old-fashioned crib of solid wood.

Alice's chair stopped and her hands went

up. "Mary! She can never sleep in that thing!"

"Yes, she can, too, for one night, or even two," Mary retorted. "I am not going to buy a bed for her to-day and have everybody in town talking, with at least half of them right here in our way. I am going to have that child all Saturday and Sunday without anybody finding out she is here! Then we can see her ourselves, and I am going to fix this bed for her so she can be in our room and not be lonesome."

Never had Mary's heart been in such a tumult as it was now over the thought of this child who was coming—coming to her! To hide it all, she set the crib down in their bedroom, beside her twin bed—and Alice instantly longed that it might be set by hers! But, of course, that was not to be thought of. Mary would have to look after both at night.

"It won't be long enough for her," said Alice, anxiously, her wheel chair following Mary into the bedroom.

"Yes, it will," returned Mary with scornful confidence; "I make all five year old skirts thirteen inches long; from the bottom of the skirts to the floor is twelve and from the waist to the neck is nine, with nine left for the neck and head." Instantly her tape-line was reeled off from her side and the length of the crib deftly measured. "There, I knew it! She will be an exact fit, with several inches to spare for tucking in bed clothes."

"I forgot you had children all measured off by inches," said Alice meekly.

"This crib was made in the old times, too, when things were expected to last a while. They didn't dump a child out when it was a year old and buy a new bed for her, though I do admit that she usually had to crawl out the second year to make way for the next comer. Still, they made them long enough, so if there happened to be a gap in the line a new bed was not necessary."

Under Mary's capable hand, and with the help of Alice, that little old-time bed, which

their grandfather had slept in, blossomed like a rose. The daintiest little mattress was made for it, blankets were devised from some packed away woolens, a little comfort with silken flowers and zephyr knots of blue was fluffed into shape; and all the small sleepers of the past would have been amazed to see the old crib itself slip out of sight into a frilled blue sateen cover! It was the prettiest little bed imaginable. A princess could not have asked for a better. And that common-place October day was simply transformed for these two women who had lived so many years alone.

Again and again as they had sewed, however, Alice had to go back to the mystery of it, and force Mary to discuss various phases thereof.

"What are you going to tell folks?" Alice questioned, with renewed consciousness of a gaping town.

"Nothing," said Mary, again, with emphatic brevity.

"Mary!" exclaimed Alice, "you know you

can't do that! You will have to tell them something!"

There was no answer and Mary's lips were firm.

"But what will they think?" persisted Alice.

"Whatever they want to."

"Then *I* am going to tell them something!" said Alice boldly.

"No, you are not, either!" was another emphatic response, and Alice knew in her heart that what Mary decided would be done.

"But," parried Alice, "there is no *use* in making a silly mystery of it."

"That may all be, but it is a mystery; and, besides, I like mystery. It's a long time since we stirred up the town any."

Alice was silent for a moment. It was not pleasant even for her to remember just how they, as a family, had last stirred the town. But turning from this quickly, she said, with a bit of pleading in her tone, "Why don't you tell the simple truth to

people, all about the letter and how little you know, yourself?"

"Because they will fill in all we don't know, and be absolutely sure they are right; so I prefer to have them think we know it all, and let them work away on the whole—tell them nothing—and let them wriggle," Mary smiled grimly.

"They will wriggle certainly," admitted Alice smiling dimly back; "but I think there is a better way than to put the whole town on edge with curiosity—which will be a perfectly natural curiosity."

"I think it is better than telling the little we do know, and then have Sophie Stoneham argue with me every time I see her that I am doing the devil's work in keeping the child away from people who ought to have her. She will know all about who ought to have her. And then, having the story change and grow with every telling would set me crazy. The fact that they will think we know all, will keep them within bounds, because folks don't like to be caught guess-

ing wrong. The whole town may turn into a detective agency if it wants to,—which it will certainly do, anyway,—and turn up the universe to find the facts. I can hear Sophie Stoneham holding forth on the matter as she sees it. You don't come against people as I do, Alice, or you would find out that silence has many virtues. You don't ever have it to unsay, and not often to apologize for."

Alice sighed acquiescence. Mary always got the best of it in an argument; and, even if she didn't, Mary's decisions had come to be law.

CHAPTER III

MARY

If the gray late October day was transformed for these two from quiet routine into a thing of excitement and expectation, the night was equally lively for Mary. She could not sleep for thought of the little child who was to come to her—to her! She must not disturb Alice, of course, but how she longed to make a light and gaze and gaze upon the little picture! It was already indelibly printed upon her brain—every cunning curl that framed the small round face, the laugh that lit the child's eyes and held the dear sweet lips open to show a shining row of even white teeth,—the pudgy fist stuck under the chin, were all clearly there in her mind—but she wanted to hold them before her eyes and drink in every detail again. At last she fell asleep, but only to

dream of a fairy land of laughing little folk, skipping, dancing, racing over green fields and under billowing snow-clouds which were as gay as the children in their field of azure blue!

At the first hint of dawn Alice and Mary were both awake, and Mary was soon upon her feet to begin that day of days. Alice wanted to do the same, but Mary urged that she rest longer—a most desirable thing for Alice herself, but also convenient for Mary to seek again that small pictured face, alone. Before she could leave the room, however, Alice forestalled her:

"Mary, let me have the picture before you go. I want to see again how she looks."

Mary was silent a perceptible instant; then she said, with unaccustomed artfulness, "All right, as soon as I light the fire in the stove I will bring it to you."

Alice stared, for she was sure Mary had the picture with her at that moment; but remembering, as she was destined to do many times in the future, that Mary had all

the rights in the matter and she none, she refrained from comment.

Mary kept her face turned away, dressed with her usual dispatch, and hurrying out to the kitchen rattled the stove lid industriously with one hand after lighting the fire, while she slipped the picture from her pocket with the other and feasted her eyes once more. Then she took turns washing one hand at the sink while she still held it with the other. When able no longer to dissemble, she carried it in to Alice—who knew full well by this time that it came from the pocket of the dress Mary was wearing.

Neither Mary Halsey, herself, nor any one who knew her, had ever guessed the difference between her interior and exterior. The village people when they met her saw a spare, erect figure and a face from which youth had not gone—had no right to be gone, for she was yet in her twenties,—twenty-seven, to be exact. And her clean, fresh complexion confirmed the youth, if one noticed it. But there were firm lines about

her mouth and eyes which indicated a full measure of care and responsibility, while her rare smile consisted mainly of high gleams piercing the steady blue-gray eyes, leaving lids unsympathetic and giving the mouth a touch of sarcasm which gradually robbed it of its warmth. These were the things one noticed most. Her manner of dressing was always severe, out-of-date and exceedingly plain. Her skirts were down about her heels, instead of—well, where the war brought them for most women. She rarely had a new dress, in fact. Alice conformed to the same standards, but as she didn't walk it wasn't so noticeable,—and the town, somehow, knew that Alice did as Mary said, though Alice was the older by two years. But Alice's dark hair was always attractively arranged, while Mary's was severity itself. It was light golden brown, soft of texture, and might have been beautiful in its own natural waves had it not been tightly held back for so many years. This, in general, was the personality that

Mary presented the village people who had watched her hurrying to and from the various homes along the highway for at least ten years past, winter and summer, in snow, sleet or wind, in spring sunshine or summer heat, while she kept everybody's clothes in good shape in the village and for miles around as well. The longer trips must be made in good weather, so that she might without fail be back to Alice for the night. Besides this, she and Alice made children's dresses for Barringer stores.

A very prosaic exterior, indeed, Mary Halsey presented for the village eye, and nobody dreamed that the interior corresponded perfectly. They knew she was industrious, capable and the incarnation of honor, according to strictest New England standards; and, if she was sharp in her judgments and sarcastic in her humor, this was the inward that fitted into the outward picture she presented to them.

As for Mary's obliviousness of the outer and inner difference, it came from ignor-

ance of the other side of things. Her knowledge concerning her own exterior grew constantly less and less, for she spent little time before a mirror, while the interior, so marvelously at antipodes, was a poignantly conscious thing.

Who would have dreamed that Mary Halsey, New England "old maid," (as she was already classified because of her severity of dress and manner) had a husband? Nobody, of course. Any such statement would instantly have been denied. And yet Mary's inner self stoutly proclaimed that she had! Few people remembered that in Mary's early youth, at seventeen, to be exact, she had made a trip away and come back with fresh roses in her cheeks, twin stars in her quiet eyes, and dancing light on her fair hair which, somehow, had learned new ways in the six weeks' stay. And people had exclaimed on meeting her, "How fine you look, Mary!" "That southern climate must agree with you!" And no one knew that a young man had come to see Mary Halsey from that

southern town, for nobody had had a glimpse of him. He came one night and went away immediately. Just before that Elwood Halsey, the only brother of Alice and Mary, had quarreled with his father and left never to be heard from again; the father had died almost immediately, and with family calamities coming in hurdles, one after another, as they often do, Alice fell from a step ladder and was never able to walk again. Consequently events in the Halsey family were too precipitous, entirely, at that period for even New England energy to keep up with every detail. So the village gossips never got hold of the fact that Mary Halsey had found a lover in that one trip south, or that she uncompromisingly dismissed him on his one visit to her later; but they did observe that Mary's dancing hair fell promptly into straight lines, and the twin star lights flitted forth from her eyes. They knew, also, that following the family calamities she had taken up the sewing for everybody in the village that could afford it, and that she gave

Alice every care. They thought it dreadful, at first, that Alice should be in the little house alone all the days while Mary was out; but so rapidly capable did Alice and the wheel chair prove themselves, that it was nothing unusual to hear wheels turning in response to a knock on the door, and to be received with as much ease as if Alice were free-footed and strong.

Mention of Mary Halsey's husband indeed would have startled the village! But he was a reality with Mary! She had cherished a man's love in her heart, and nourished hers for him through all the years. He was hers and she was his for time and eternity, so far as she was concerned. That she had heard from him only twice meant nothing to this vital, time-abiding love affair. It was a marriage of hearts, for Mary, that nothing could dissolve, though even that in source was but a thing of a few weeks' association and a southern picnic with a day's disclosing, when Mary had gone on that six weeks' visit to a Kentucky

cousin. No one had dreamed that a trip of two hours up the river in a row boat—just a boy and a girl who had daringly left the picnic party—could mean such momentous things. The southern cousins, accustomed to harmless flirtations of no moment, had never afterward connected the two; and there was never any revelation from them, or questions asked by Mary, later.

If Mary had ever told Alice of her love affair, the mere telling would have prevented its dropping into morbid fancies, while Alice's sympathy would undoubtedly have greatly softened the sharpness of the bitter-sweet experience. But keeping it close, pent within her own heart, she grew fantastic in her love, and very bitter against her brother Elwood, who, had he stood by the family, would have made things very different. Alice could not from the first understand her sister's bitterness, and she would have been amazed at her devotion to a shadow. But the shadow was suddenly materializing; for, though Mary knew noth-

ing of the physical habitation of her mate, yet now, after years of solitary devotion, she was to be miraculously presented with a child! A child that was to be her very own —no matter where she came from, just now! And Mary's well-trained imagination had gone out to meet and to claim her with a ready motherhood that would have amazed her sister Alice. "Her child" was coming! That was the song of Mary's heart as she flew about the kitchen on this morning of mornings.

CHAPTER IV

AN ARRIVAL

BREAKFAST was ready to serve on the minute of seven—as, of course, it could have been two hours before. Then Mary stood at the window watching, her expectation too keen for superficial nervousness, while Alice sat in her wheel chair with white, interlaced fingers, and eyes fixed too upon the front windows. There was an instant's whirr of a motor, at last, and Mary threw open the house door at the moment the taxi door swung round revealing the profile of a uniformed nurse who did not get out. But an alert young man stepped immediately to the ground, then reached for the hand of a little girl in snug brown wrap, furs and cap to match, helping her uncertain step carefully to the running board and thence to the walk in front. Mary met them just outside the

door, and the introductions were skillfully managed by the capable young man, though Mary could never have told just how. She got them into the house successfully, however, and introduced them to Alice, who swung about to meet them in her wheel chair, with ready if somewhat excited grace. Then, while the young man went out to see about bringing in a trunk and satchel, Alice put both arms about the little brown bundle which was Elizabeth Lee Starling, and gazed warmly into her eyes until the child smiled back at her. Mary, though watching for the trunk, noted this with a quick stab, and said with energy:

"We must take Elizabeth's wraps off at once; it is warm in here." So she began vigorously unfastening and removing, while the little girl submitted with the unmoved air of children when subjected to many new experiences to which they have no key and against which they have ceased to struggle.

After placing the trunk with the chauffeur's help, the young man left immediately

—almost precipitately it would have seemed if Mary and Alice had not been too excited over the child to notice.

Elizabeth Lee standing before them was indeed a beautiful child with rare brown eyes and curling brown hair, a dear smile and rosy cheeks; perfect in form and round with the fullness of health. Then, to crown the sweet vision which was presented to these two heart-hungry women, she was exquisitely dressed in a simple little white gown of finest materials, with every accessory corresponding.

It was no wonder that they took little note of anything else, and it was some minutes before they remembered breakfast. Then the little girl's eyes had wandered to the set table, and Mary flew to the kitchen for the hot things which were all ready. So they were soon gathered about the snowy breakfast table, Alice swinging easily to her place in the wheel chair, Mary lifting Elizabeth into a high chair before a second plate, then seating herself in a very straight, un-

compromising chair that just suited her uncompromising exterior. The sun danced in upon them from the east window as though challenging the three to life's happiness.

Mary was mistress of ceremonies.

"Elizabeth, I guess you're hungry, riding so early in the morning; I'll give you something to eat first and let Alice wait," said Mary, a thrill at her heart and sudden sharpness of tone to hide it.

The child's big brown eyes turned to her with a wistful look gathering in their depths.

"Everybody says 'Libbie Lee,'" came slowly from the little lips.

"I like Elizabeth much better," said Mary briskly, without looking at the little girl. "That is what I am going to call you," she added decidedly. "It takes too long to say Libbie Lee."

Alice, with quick intuition, laid a hand upon the child's and bent toward her with a smile that instantly brought one in return.

"You've got time to say Libbie Lee, hasn't you—Auntie Alice?" came quickly from the little girl with the falling inflection of certainty.

"Yes, dear, I surely have," laughed back Auntie Alice, in delight with the name the child had chosen for her, unbidden,—such delight, indeed, that she spoke with a new note of authority to her aggressive sister.

"Mary, get some syrup to put on Libbie Lee's pancakes."

But revolutions are not so quickly accomplished with natures like Mary Halsey's.

"Syrup! You never know what sort of stuff syrup may be made of, but honey is always safe. I will get some honey for her."

The golden-combed honey ranked equally in acceptability with syrup, so far as Libbie Lee was concerned; so, as the sweet fluid flowed over her pancakes, she began politely, "Thank you,"—then stopped, plainly puzzled for a moment, only to go on confidently, —"Uncle Mary."

Alice laughed uncontrollably. She could

not have helped it if the heavens had fallen —and she almost felt that they would when she could look into Mary's face. Consternation, grief and almost anger swept quickly over the usually inscrutable mask that Mary carried.

It was Mary who first found words:

"'Uncle Mary.'—What do you mean by calling me Uncle?" And there was strained sharpness in her tone.

The child turned startled and bewildered eyes toward her: "Why, there was Auntie Abbie and Uncle Cary at the 'Home'—and here there's Auntie Alice and Uncle Mary!" She emphasized the little difference in the names with an aggrieved defense that was really funny to both of them, and took much of the sudden sting which Mary had first found in the name applied to her.

Little did she dream how the name was to go out and sweep the town with its aptness! There was so much more to think of, just then, that she made no further ado over it,

and had no thought that it would persist, even in the child's mind.

Breakfast over, at last, and Libbie Lee's little abdomen swelled to its utmost with pancakes and golden honey, Mary Halsey essayed to make the day move on as days at home, when she was not sewing, had a habit of doing. She went at once out to the kitchen to "do" the dishes, leaving Alice and the little girl to their own devices.

And conversation, from the very first, did not languish between the two that were left.

"Auntie Alice, why don't you walk round like other folks?" came in the kindest little tone of curiosity from the small stranger.

"Why, because my feet are just no-account feet," Alice returned, smiling into the child's earnest face.

Then Libbie Lee stepped up to her and said eagerly, "May I peek at them?"

For answer Alice lifted her long, light skirt and displayed two perfectly correct feet, clad in substantial slippers.

"Why, Auntie Alice, they are all right—unless they are bad. Auntie Abbie says mine are sometimes; but they are bad because they go to places they shouldn't, and yours, I guess, are bad 'cause they won't go at all!" And the little laugh rang out merrily.

Libbie Lee felt thoroughly at home with Auntie Alice, it was clear. Institutional children, being accustomed to contacts of all sorts, take what comes to them with a philosophy that stands them in good stead; if it is freedom, they make much of it, if it is submission to authority—why trouble to rebel? So it must be. A new experience had come to the little girl, and finding Alice so approachable and responsive, she was making good use of her time while Mary was out of the room to find out many things she wanted to know.

Alice laughed at the child's interest in her useless feet, and answered her accusation that they were bad because they would not go at all, with an admission that "this was

about right, she guessed." "But," she added, "we must not blame the feet too much, for the back was bad first."

The little girl looked in quiet surprise from the feet up to Alice's back; then down to her own little feet, which she moved inquiringly about, at the same time feeling of her own back.

"Why, feet are tied to backs, aren't they? And just can't help doing what backs say, can they?"

"Yes, but the head tells the back what to do, you know," laughed Auntie Alice; "and so you have come up to the real trouble at last, I suspect."

There was more in this than the little girl dreamed, for Alice Halsey sometimes felt that her energetic sister thought if she would only try determinedly enough, the helpless feet would go about as they once did—and there were times when she cruelly upbraided herself that they did not!

But Libbie Lee, all oblivious, went on with investigations concerning her own brown-

curled head. At last she exclaimed with delight:

"It is my head that makes my feet go! My thinker up here just thinks, 'Go!' and I go right off! Auntie Alice you must—" then she hesitated, trying unconsciously to get hold of the initial force of movement, "you've just got to make your thinker act right, then you can walk just like me!" And she went briskly off.

"Well," smiled Alice, a little slowly, "I will go right to work at it and see if I can make the old thinker do as it should. But you must give me time, for it has been doing wrong a long while."

"I'm going to help you," said the child, confidently.

Having finished this source of interest, the little girl looked inquiringly around the room at the chintz-covered couch, sewing machine and big base-burner, which heated the entire little one-floor and attic abode. Then she tried the two old rockers with chintz seats and backs, and inspected two

straight chairs which held down two unoccupied corners, her eyes turning at last to the tall secretary which occupied the space between the two back windows.

"What's this?" she asked, pointing to it.

And Alice, smiling at her curiosity, and in a sort of reaction from the talk about her own useless feet, which had left her heart a little sore, said aloud something which had often come whimsically to her mind. She looked at the grim old piece of furniture of which she had stood in awe as a child, since she was never allowed to open it and replied:

"Oh, that holds Mary's chains which tie her down."

Instantly realizing the possible consequences of such a revelation, Alice in alarm cried quickly, "Don't tell Mary I said that!" Then tried to cover any suggestibility the remark might hold with the commonplace statement: "It is full of papers that are important, and nobody goes into it

but Mary. So you and I mustn't think or talk about it any more."

The little girl looked soberly back at her, and said, "No." But it did not go out of her mind, although she did not talk about it any more, since children of "Homes" must do as they are told.

Meanwhile Mary was having trouble trying to make things "go" as usual in the kitchen; for there were very diverting things. First, "the milk boy" had arrived, shambled up to the back kitchen door and tried an unyielding knob; then lifted a rugged face of amazement as Mary turned a key to open the door to him. He had always walked right in, as far as his memory ran back, which was some distance, since he had been milk-boy to the Halsey's for at least a generation.

"I'll empty it here," said Mary, hastily producing a small tin pail; and then remembering, cried excitedly, "That won't do, Jim Peters! I've got to have five pints this morning and to-morrow morning—and all

the time now! Let me get the big pail and you take it out and fill it!"

Jim Peters looked helplessly at her, as if his senses were reeling. Five pints of milk daily for the Halsey girls! He pondered over it as he hurried unsteadily toward his wagon. Never before had he left over a pint—well, he might once, or even twice, have left a quart. But five pints—and regular, was beyond his comprehension. As he shambled back, still hastily, Mary was standing at the door ready to take it from him, and he could only glance furtively around at the windows for a solution of the mystery, as he inquired cautiously, knowing well that Mary Halsey did not like prying, "Got comp'ny, hev ye?"

"No," said Mary crisply, taking the brimming pail and closing the door promptly.

Then she said to herself, "Well, he doesn't know much—" adding indignantly, "but every house he goes to will get that and he's just begun his round!"

"I can hear him now," she went on

grimly, hurrying through her dishes and keeping one ear open for the music of that little high treble alternating with Alice's low voice in the sitting room, though she could not catch what they were saying. She wouldn't let Alice help in the kitchen usually, as there was so little to do ordinarily, and she did not "want her around in the way." This morning she would have liked to have her come for an excuse to bring the little stranger—but there was the milk boy and of course she couldn't.

She followed the milk boy about in her thought: "He'll say, 'Mary and Alice Halsey must be going to keep boarders. They got five pints of milk this morning and want it reg'lar.' Between here and the Kembles he will have decided it's boarders, and by night everybody in town will know it, though of course Sophie Stoneham will rip him wide open with questions and find out just how many facts he has! Then she may decide that Alice is going to try the milk cure, that *The Banner* told about last week.

That's the only hope I have; but she'll be here to see about it to-day. Mercy! I must get through and do something to head her off!"

Excitement rose in Mary every moment—and no wonder. There had never been anything in the brown cottage of the Halseys so beautiful and young as little Libbie Lee since Alice and Mary were young themselves. In fact there had never been a superfluity of young things in the entire village. New England folk of the past few generations have not been prolific in child-bearing, and inland villages like Sunfield, brought in little new blood and few new things of any sort. But for the factory people there would have been few children, indeed. The village was seven miles away from the railroad, and while a few automobiles had come over the hills and found homes in the old-time barns, they had not changed the even tenor of the place as to growth and innovations. A scattering row of houses on either side along the valley

highway, flanked by hills, with a church steeple rising determinedly, a general store or two, a small factory and a school house were its component parts. Back of the scattering row of houses stretched at varying lengths, small farms of garden and meadow land, freely interspersed with rocks, and bounded by the hard-won, ancestral accumulations of preceding rock-diggers. Piled in uneven stretches these cast-out bowlders of previous generations made picturesque enclosures, especially when over-run with flowering vines, which nature furnishes in abundance, as if to make up for the bleakness of those granite-filled hills.

Mary did not stop to philosophize about the town, or she might have been more lenient toward its desire for some interesting developments to break the monotony of life. She was only bent upon keeping this one bit of youth and charm to herself for two days!

There are few things that come to us with-

out alloy, however, as Mary was to find out. She hurried back to the sitting room, after having put the kitchen to rights, and caught from Alice's lips something which wound up with, "Your Uncle Mary."

She appeared at the door on the instant while a speaking face said sharply to Alice, "Don't you begin that, now!"

Then she noted that Elizabeth, as she had determined to call her, leaned affectionately at Alice's knee. Mary went at once to the child and stooping, for pretext, examined the little garter to adjust an imaginary wrinkle in the stocking, and her face grew strangely flushed from the unaccustomed touch of little rosy knees.

Alice, noting the flush, said quickly, "You've hurried too much with those dishes!"

"No, I haven't," returned Mary brusquely. "But I have some work I must finish." And she sat down to the machine and began to sew rapidly.

Libbie Lee looked on with instant interest,

watching the wheel whirl and a piece of goods fly from under its crooked foot. This was absorbing enough for a space, but soon the child's eye fixed upon Mary's face most disconcertingly. She was not a child who talked every minute. She alternated between thinking and talking; storing up ammunition, so to speak, one moment and firing it off the next.

Mary bore the child's scrutiny unconcernedly as long as she could, then she glanced up with the high gleam in her eye.

Libbie Lee took it soberly: "Why don't your eyes wrinkle up underside when you smile?"

Mary replied in unconscious defense: "They smile just the way they were made to smile."

"Auntie Alice's wrinkle up all 'round," persisted the child, "and smile all over,—see," turning to Alice, "and that makes me smile, too."

Alice came instantly to the rescue: "Libbie Lee, come here! You are a great little

girl to investigate! Come here to me and I will find something to interest you." And the eyes that "smiled all over" were so winning that Libbie Lee was at once at Alice's knee, looking expectantly up into her face.

But Mary rose on the instant from the machine, closed it and put her work away. Then she turned to the little girl and took her firmly by the hand, with a look of decision thrown to Alice by the way: "Come with me and I will get you some cookies."

It was rather a grim invitation, or command, but "cookies" were new to Libbie Lee, and she followed without a word to the kitchen, where Mary seated her by the kitchen table and gave her nice round things to eat with sugar on top.

"Now, stay here a moment, and I will be back for you," said Mary. Then she hurried out for a word with Alice alone.

CHAPTER V

MARY'S STRATEGY

"ALICE," she said brusquely, entering the sitting room again. "I have thought how to manage things for to-day."

Alice looked puzzled: "What do you mean?"

"I mean how I am going to manage not to let folks know the child is here for to-day —or to-morrow. Jim Peters has already started things."

"How?" asked Alice, puzzled again.

"I ordered five pints of milk—to-day, to-morrow—and regular."

"Oh," said Alice, comprehending. "Then you can't do a thing, Mary!"

"Yes, but I can, and I will," Mary returned vehemently.

"What?" queried Alice skeptically.

Decision came instantly to Mary, and it

was the more tenaciously adhered to, because, as Alice promptly pronounced, it was absurd!

"I am going to the kitchen attic and stay all day with her!"

"Mary! How absurd! You can't do it!"

"Watch and see! I've got to hurry, too, or Sophie Stoneham will be here before I can get things fixed."

"Fixed how?" questioned Alice, bewildered.

"Never mind," answered Mary, as she hurried out the room and brought back Libbie Lee, who had just finished her cookies. Then Mary turned to the kitchen again and hurried up the attic stairs.

The child had a sort of pathetic soberness as Mary brought her back, and as Mary left again, Alice with her quick sympathy, put out her arms once more to the little girl, who smiled and ran into them.

"I am going to stay with you, Auntie Alice. Mayn't I?"

"I don't know, little girl," Alice replied

uncertainly; "Mary didn't tell me just what she was going to do." And Alice began at once to divert the child in loyal preparation for whatever Mary might have in mind.

Meantime Mary was busy in what Alice would have said was an absurd way, indeed, if Alice had been looking on.

With lips tightly set, Mary began pulling out an old carpet from a corner of the low attic. This she spread down upon the floor, pushing it out in every direction as far as she could. Next she lugged out several old comforts from a great chest; and, contrary to all New England ethics from the days of the Pilgrims down, these comforts, dedicated to the use of beds alone—never under any circumstances to be allowed to touch a floor—were spread about on top of the old carpet, covering the many holes and making a deep, noiseless mesh upon which to tread.

There is a certain high-spirited reaction that comes to the best of folks when they reach the point of trampling on traditions, and Mary was no exception.

"I'm not going to have Sophie Stoneham asking what child that is running about the attic floor! She'll not hear a sound through these old comforts!" She was enjoying her innovations.

Then she tacked up at the low side windows impromptu curtains made from old dress skirts, leaving open only the long back window which looked out over brown meadows and rolling hills.

"There, I think that will do," she said, at last, surveying with satisfaction the low room with sloping roof. "And there are plenty of things to play with here."

Then she went down in triumph to Alice and the child.

"Well, I've got everything ready," she said in grim glee to Alice; and Alice instantly came back with a spirited, "Ready! What do you mean, Mary Halsey?"

"I mean that I have fitted up a padded cell where Elizabeth Lee and I are to stay to-day in peace!" Mary said under her breath.

"You shan't do it, Mary Halsey, and leave me all alone!" exclaimed Alice, whispering back.

"You won't be alone, you needn't worry about that—you'll have plenty of company!"

Protests, of course, amounted to nothing; and seeing Libbie Lee begin to look vaguely troubled, Alice meekly said no more, while Mary turned with authority to the little girl: "We're going upstairs, now."

But the child drew back: "I want to stay here with Auntie Alice," knowing with instinctive finality that rolling chairs could not mount stairways.

And Mary Halsey, for the first time in her life, resorted to "wheedling," as she would have called it in another: "We're going upstairs to see a lot of things—things you never saw before."

The child hesitated, and Alice looked loyally away, remembering, as she often did in clashes between her sister and herself, how much Mary did for her. Then Libbie

Lee obediently put a hand out to Mary, and went wonderingly through the kitchen and up the attic stairs.

"This is such a funny place," she said, mounting the top step, and looking slowly around.

"Yes," returned Mary with a new eagerness. "But see, it is just like walking around on a bed!" And Libbie Lee laughed merrily as Mary stalked about on the outraged bed-comforts. Then Mary began bringing forth long forgotten toys. Nothing was ever thrown away in the typical New England home, and care of toys was carefully taught, as they were expected to be handed down from generation to generation. Libbie Lee was soon interested in a big doll that had been packed away since Alice and Mary passed their doll days. Things went pretty well, though now and then the little girl paused to ask why the windows on the sides were covered up. She wanted to see what was outside.

At last Mary's watch said it was noon,

time to get something to eat, though she had brought up with her a glass of milk and more cookies for lunch for her little charge.

"Keep still, Elizabeth, just a minute, don't say a word or move—" and the child was surprised into sudden quiet.

Mary cautiously opened the door, not a sound was to be heard from below. "Now we will go down stairs," she said.

"To Auntie Alice," the child cried joyously, and Mary gave a reluctant, "Yes."

They trudged down hand in hand, but at the bottom of the stairs Libbie Lee ran through the kitchen and hallway straight into the arms of Alice.

"What have you been doing?" asked Alice as she tenderly folded the child to her.

"Oh, just lots of things," returned the child a little wearily, whereupon Mary broke in with, "What company have you had?"

And Alice reluctantly admitted that Sophie Stoneham had been in.

"Special committee from the town," returned Mary, scornfully. "What did she ask you?"

"About the milk cure," admitted Alice with a smile this time, which came easily with that warm little body leaning against her knee.

Mary chuckled, "I knew it,—and did she ask where I was?"

"Of course, that was natural," said Alice.

"And what did you tell her?"

"I said you were doing some work up attic."

"Then I suppose she listened for sounds and didn't hear any," questioned Mary.

"Go on Mary and get some dinner; we are famished," Alice laughed, squeezing the little girl close within her arms, while Mary inwardly squirmed. She could squeeze with her heart, but she did not know how to do it with her arms.

"I won't take a step," said Mary, "till you tell me what you said to Sophie Stoneham about my being up attic."

"I told her you were looking into some old chests!"

Mary Halsey smiled satisfaction and went at once to prepare lunch, or dinner, for their main meal was at mid-day.

"I don't think anybody will be in this afternoon," Mary chuckled, as she stepped briskly about the kitchen. "I wouldn't have believed Alice would do so well at throwing Sophie off the track. And she will tell everybody as she goes down the street; so we will be safe for to-day, I think."

It was a delicious little dinner; Libbie Lee was hungry, and she and Auntie Alice were wholly happy, with Mary partially so, because Libbie Lee would turn to Alice for meat to be cut and bread to be buttered, when by all rights of common sense and fitness, Mary should be the one called upon! A sudden determination seized her; she had not meant to go to the attic again, for she really thought Sophie Stoneham would allay curiosity for the day, but she was going to

have the child to herself absolutely for the afternoon, that was sure! And to go to the attic was the only way to manage it.

So, with the dishes washed again, and the kitchen set to rights, Mary announced with as much matter-of-courseness as she could summon: "We are going upstairs now, Elizabeth, to see lots of things you haven't seen yet," giving Alice orders with a meaning glance which quieted all protest but a low, "Mary!"

The little girl again looked from one to the other. Alice's powers of entertainment had not been fully tested, it was true, still it was nice just staying with her! But Mary's firm hand reaching hers was quite compelling, and the child went reluctantly up the stairs again, while Mary determined that it should be so gay an afternoon that Libbie Lee could have no regrets. Feeling so sure that no one would call, Mary romped with the child as she would not have dreamed possible, and Libbie Lee laughed out and cried, "Oh, Uncle Mary, you are so

funny!" again and again. Mary drew her around and around upon an old red sled over those rebellious comforts, and even piled up more at one end of the room that she might slide down hill! At last, when both were tired out, Mary found a little old sewing box that had been hers when a child, and in it was everything intact; thread and needles, thimble and scissors, with even a cardboard lamb whose outline was to be filled in with gay threads of wool. She showed Libbie Lee how to do it, and while the child was absorbed with the task, Mary turned to the old trunk from which she had taken it, and a sudden impulse made her open a cunningly devised secret little compartment in the trunk, of which no one knew but herself—for it was she who had devised it. Years had passed since she opened it last, and why she should do it now, she could not tell.

There were just two letters slipped carefully in the narrow, hidden space; and, glancing at the child to make sure that she

was not looking, Mary opened one. She knew every word the letter contained, but it thrilled her anew to see them lying crisp and firm on the substantial business sheet.

It was a simple, straight-forward love-letter, and the second was much like it.

The afternoon ended, tea time passed and no one came in, for which Mary and Alice were profoundly grateful. The little girl's eyes grew heavy as soon as tea was over. Mary, noting it, was glad to postpone dish-washing, and briskly set about putting her little charge to bed. There was no objection on the child's part, and when she saw the little old crib with its transforming lace and frills, she was full of delight.

"It's such a funny little bed, and so pretty," she said again and again, as Mary slipped wee garments from the small warm body—while her fingers thrilled at every touch and Alice looked on in breathless ecstacy. Never had a little child been undressed in that house within their mature recollection. It was an indescribable mo-

ment for both, stirring dormant things that lie in every true woman's heart. And when the dainty night dress was thrown over the brown head and fell to the pink toes, it was much as though a small angel had suddenly lit at their feet!

But a very matter-of-fact child-voice at once announced: "Now, I must say my prayers. The nurse wouldn't let me kneel on the floor to say 'em last night in the sleeping car. She said folks would step on my feet going through the car. And it was so funny kneeling on the bed and bouncing 'round all the time, I 'most forgot my prayers," she ended with a gurgle; but added quickly, "I'm going to say 'em *good* to-night, though, with this pretty bed to say 'em by."

The little white-clad figure knelt, wriggled an instant to get into just the right position, then the small voice began its petitions in a suddenly reverent room.

"Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; if I should die before

I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." A moment's pause, and she went on: "God bless, bless—" Then she stopped, and her head bobbed up with sudden question in the brown eyes. "Is it right to ask God to bless everybody in *two* Homes? Maybe I oughtn't to ask for but one."

"What do you mean," came stiffly from Mary.

"Why I always ask God to bless everybody in the 'Home' and I want Him to do it now, too; but then I want Him to bless everybody here, and maybe He won't want to do both."

Alice and Mary found their lips twitching with amusement, but Mary said quickly, "It seems to me, since you are here, you could just say, 'everybody in the house,' and that would do."

The child was not satisfied; she went on plaintively: "But, if God would do it, I would like Him to bless the 'Home,' too."

Then Mary and Alice together, came to the rescue. "Of course God will do it,"

said Mary, jerkily—it seemed so odd to be talking about what God would do—while Alice put in warmly, "He'll just love to do it!"

And a beaming little face went down on the bed again: "God bless everybody in the Home where I'm not, and in the home where I am, amen!"

She was up on her feet instantly. "Isn't it nice that way?" A sober minute followed and she added, "But I do wish Emma and little Billie had pretty beds like mine!"

"Who is Emma and little Billie," asked Mary, with a hint of rebellion against these interlopers in her tone.

"Billie was the littlest boy and Emma was next to me in the button-up-line," returned the child in plaintive brevity.

"The button-up-line," queried Mary and Alice together.

"Yes," said the little girl with renewed animation; "don't you know?" Then, seeing from their faces that they did not, she explained happily: "You see it's dreadful

hard to button up your own dress in the back," and she reached around to show how hard it was—"but it's just fun to button-up anybody else! So we all stood in a line and Ella buttoned-up Mary, and Mary buttoned-up Amy, and Amy buttoned-up Sarah, and Sarah buttoned-up Bridgie, and Bridgie—"

"I see," broke in Mary on that line which she saw was going to be interminable, ending it with, "and Emma buttoned-up you."

"No," returned the child positively, "*I* buttoned-up *Emma,*" while Alice laughed sympathetically, then asked, "And who buttoned-up the last little girl with nobody behind her?"

"Oh," cried the child in triumph, "the one who had dressed the fastest that morning always got to do it—and *I* got to do it lots and lots of times!"

"Well, that was good," broke in Mary again (with lingering rebellion toward these childish recollections), "but here's the little bed waiting for you."

And the child's delight was quickly re-

newed while she laughed, "I'm going to be a big, big doll in it!"

So she looked, when she had nestled down in its soft depths, while Mary tucked the covers about her curls with a hand that very nearly trembled. Both Mary and Alice had kissed her good-night, and now Mary motioned Alice to roll out, and immediately followed, herself. As a matter of fact both wanted to stay—fairly ached to stay, but Mary knew she must not with the dishes yet to wash,—and Alice should not stay if she couldn't!

The child was almost instantly asleep, and never did Mary Halsey make dishes fly as she did that night. As soon as her task was done she was at the bed-room door, peeking cautiously in to see if sleep had really come. And no one would have guessed from Alice's serene face that she had noiselessly rolled by that door a dozen times while Mary did the dishes!

"She's asleep," whispered Mary, relief and joy commingling in her tone. "Now,

we will open her trunk," she added briskly.

"Oh!" cried Alice, "we can't do that!"

"Why not?" returned Mary, who had thought it all out. "She is in our—my—charge—I must take care of her clothes. She is too little to do it for herself."

Alice thought a moment, then seeing that Mary was right, she rolled her chair with alacrity toward the little hall where the trunk had been temporarily placed.

"You better not try to come in here," Mary grudgingly warned, "there's no room."

"I won't be a bit in the way," returned Alice, pleadingly, and Mary said no more. She put the key, which had been in her pocket since the child's arrival, at once in the lock—and, with a hand that decidedly trembled this time. The whole thing was so contrary to anything she could ever have imagined would come into her experience, and the day had been one of constant emotional strain! But the lock sprang open with prosaic alertness, and lifting the lid

with tightly pressed lips, Mary faced the neatly covered trays. It was hard again to go further, but with a jerk the lids were up, and while Alice looked on breathlessly, Mary laid out dainty little garments of all sorts. They were the prettiest little things either of them had ever looked upon! Of the daintiest textures, and most exquisitely made. Then they came to the larger tray, and finally to the big space below, to find beautiful small dresses,—for morning, for Church, for parties! Never were two spinsters so excited and delighted! They exclaimed, and warned each other:

"Alice, Alice! Suppose somebody comes to the door, what would they think of the racket you are making?" Or, "Mary, Mary! You forget how loud you are talking!" When, as a matter of fact, it was only their emotions that had run up the scale to high C!

Alice's arms were piled full of lovely things, while Mary still produced more, and both exclaimed:

"What will we ever do with them all?"

"We will have to give her all of the little bedroom, and move our things upstairs," Mary answered herself, and Alice agreed enthusiastically. They were both ready, if need be, to move out on the roof to make room for the marvel which had slipped into their lives. Mary flew into the little bedroom, which opened from their own, snatched their prosaic things from the closet shelves and hangers, wiped the dust from where no dust had ever been allowed to light, and placed each little garment away with joyous care,—just as it should be. Everything seemed absolutely new in the big trunk, and both had New England respect for "new things." Their own clothing had been piled on the bed in the little room, and now the three lower drawers from the old "high-boy" were emptied of their contents and space given for the child's under garments, gloves, sashes, etc.

Alice said at last, "What are you going to do with our things—I'd let them lie on the

bed to-night, Mary. You are all tired out, I know, if you would only own it," Alice answered herself earnestly.

"I'm not," protested Mary vigorously. "Do you think I am going to let her see this disorder in the morning?"

That was all the stimulus Mary needed —her own declaration of purpose—and she began instantly to take the things from the bed and carry them to the attic, where she disposed of them for the time being. It was late, indeed, when they finally sought their beds, and then how could they sleep with the thought of that little thing breathing so softly at Mary's bedside! Alice wished so much that she dared ask Mary to leave the light burning, so she could look over there once in a while; and Mary wished rather fiercely that Alice were not in the room at all, so she could keep a light all night!

CHAPTER VI

SUNDAY

THE next day being Sunday brought new problems. To begin with, the milk boy was more aggressive in his investigations, but Mary was quite equal to him and no hint of the real situation was allowed to pass the locked back door even when it grudgingly opened a space; neither was there possibility of his stealing information from any tell-tale window. Everything was foreseen and guarded against. Libbie Lee slept late in the be-frilled little bed. The day before had been taxing to the child in many ways, and she had slept as quietly as a rose on a summer's night till after nine o'clock.

Meantime, their breakfast done and dishes put away, Mary turned to Alice:

"I suppose I've got to go to church, or we'll have the whole town here by night!"

Alice laughed with what she imagined was hidden delight, but Mary was not slow to detect and comprehend. If Mary went to church, Alice thought that Libbie Lee would be left with her!

There was instant decision, entirely contrary to all previous plans:

"I am going to take Elizabeth to church with me," Mary casually, but firmly said.

"Why, I wouldn't think of such a thing!" protested Alice, and "What will people say?" came the old query.

"They might as well say it now and be done with it, whatever they may say," returned Mary coolly.

"But—" protested Alice again, in conscious futility,—"I'd make some kind of a statement about her first."

"Call a town meeting, I suppose, and tell them I don't know anything about her," Mary scornfully returned. Then she added sharply; "We've talked this all over before, and you had better let me manage it."

Alice knew this was final and resigned

herself to keen disappointment, for she had fully counted upon the two hours when she would have the child all for her own.

Mary kept a constant eye upon the little bed to catch the first stir within its depths. At last it came. Alice, on her part, was watching Mary's face and wheeled instantly into view. The two were breathless, while a bewildered look swept the little sleeping rose like a sudden rough wind—then she saw the two standing guard, and joyous light and color flooded it.

"Oh, I sleeped so good!"

"And aren't you hungry?" asked both her keepers together.

"Yes, I'm so hungry, but I just want to stay all the time in this pretty bed!"

Mary was on the point of saying, "Stay right there and I will bring your breakfast," but that was not at all according to her training, or oft-stated policy as to the training of children. So the firmness of self-denial came to her tones as she said, "That won't do. It is time now everybody

was up." And Alice's look of sorrowful reproach cemented her determination.

But Libbie Lee had been only joking; she tumbled gayly out of her nest, then turned and patted it with, "I'm coming back to you, pretty little bed, to-night, and every night as long as I live!" while her listeners glowed.

"I put my clothes on by myself," she said, hesitatingly, as Mary began to dress her, "that's what I had to do when I was at the 'Home'."

"Well, you are not at the 'Home' now," said Mary firmly. She wasn't going to be cheated out of everything through rules and regulations, especially if they weren't her own!

Consequently she had the joy of putting small garments on the warm little body, and Libbie Lee never twisted or squirmed once. "Homes," as a rule, disapprove of small bodily contortions. Their system soon smoothes out the last vestige. So Mary, without delay, slipped a little morning dress

over the child's head and led her out to breakfast where both women feasted their souls as the child ate and prattled. Then Mary made her ready for church—a process that, for Mary, was memorable. The pride with which she selected and put on handsome outer garments—that marked the child as coming from sources of wealth and perfect taste—was of such an inflating variety that if Mary had not learned so well the lesson of self-restraint, she must have simply floated afterward along the village street on her way to church! As it was, she started up the street a little late, so as to see no one on the way, then entered and walked up the aisle, leading Libbie Lee in jerky, determined strides, while the entire church stared. The child, so evidently, did not belong to the town. The Halsey pew had always been at the front, Mary and Libbie Lee occupied it, and no attendant of the day could fail to take astounded note. Mr. Stillwell, the old pastor, also took note and knew he must preach against odds! How much of his ser-

mon was heard will never be known, but it is certain that Mary never heard a word. Neither could she have told whether she was most happy, as she sat there with the child looking up into her face every little while, or most miserable over the coming ordeal of questions.

The benediction came at last and Sophie Stoneham, portly and wheezing, was the first to reach her.

"Well, well, Mary Halsey, how did you get her?" with breathless directness.

And the question, determining Mary's policy toward the town, enabled her to reply at once, "I stole her!"

In her joy and misery during the service Mary had constantly petitioned: "Oh, Lord, tell me what to say to them!"

Her prayer had been granted! The first question asked had been in a form that gave her immediate answer. Of course some sticklers for God's high integrity, who are extremely careless of their own, might try to prove that her answer was not strictly

true, and so could not have been providentially provided. But, in her heart, Mary knew how unquestioningly she had taken the child to whom nobody's legal right was proven. So, her answer for all came in that first reply, "I stole her," and she did not add to or take from that statement.

One after another passed and spoke to her, and what she had said first was repeated with a grim smile again and again, till Mary grasped the child more tightly and fled to the little room in the rear of the church, which served as pastor's study and class room for the smallest children of the Sunday School.

Elizabeth Lee in her short life had had many experiences, and she had learned to keep step with other little feet; so she went into the room with the few other little folk of the church, without question. But, as the other children crowded around her, in even more evident curiosity than their elders, she clung tightly to Mary's hand; and then, it seemed to her that Mary's brief introduc-

tion to the teacher meant a passing on of her ownership again!

"This is Elizabeth Lee Starling," Mary said, very firmly. "I hope she is going to be a very good little girl."

Miranda Evans, the teacher, did not have a prepossessing personality. She was tall and very angular, and her eyes didn't look in the same direction, Elizabeth could have told you in frightened whisper—though not in just those words. And, since astonishment dominated those disagreeing eyes, as Miranda looked at the child, the effect was extremely trying. When the teacher recovered herself sufficiently to put out a hand for Elizabeth Lee's, a closed little fist was thrust behind the child's back, while she cried, "I want to stay with Uncle Mary!"

"Uncle Mary!" the children all cried, and then they laughed spontaneously, while Miranda Evans' eyes, though still refusing to focus in concert, smiled too, most harmoniously. Elizabeth Lee had no idea what it

was all about, but she responded to the changed atmosphere which merriment had brought; and when Miranda Evans tapped a little bell which sent all the children to their seats, then kindly laid a hand on Elizabeth Lee's shoulder, she relinquished Mary's hand and allowed herself to be guided to a chair in the front row. The teacher returned to her place and the exercises began.

Miranda invited Mary to a chair near her own, and Mary sat stiffly through the hour, under the consciousness that the name her precious little protégé had given her would go over the town by night—and, with further inner prescience, she knew it would be fixed upon her for life; because everybody would feel it was so eminently appropriate! Somehow, it had not occurred to her that the child would call her so away from home, or she might have taken her in hand and made sure it would not be done. It was a crucial hour, but Mary met it with a bit of added firmness about the lips, even while her heart

softened again and again as the child she was calling, "Mine, mine!" turned often to her among so many strangers with smiles that confirmed the claim.

When Sunday School was over, Mary tried to hurry away, but she did not succeed before a forward child had taken hold of Elizabeth Lee and asked: "You meant to say Aunt Mary, didn't you?"

Whereupon Elizabeth Lee replied determinedly, "No, she is my Uncle Mary!"

And the children laughed again, while the forward child, looking fearfully up toward Mary, persisted, "How did she get to be your Uncle?"

"That is none of your business," returned Mary sharply, and taking her little charge by the hand she was quickly out in the open, and away from people, she thought, thankfully. All except those interested in the Sunday School had gone home, and should have been busy getting the Sunday lunch upon the table, but Mary caught sight of prying eyes behind curtains as she tried to

walk unconsciously along past the unpretentious homes lining the village street, while Elizabeth Lee's tongue ran joyously about a sparrow, a tree or a cloud—anything that caught her eager young eyes. The Sunday School had not impressed her much. She was accustomed to sitting in rows of children while somebody talked about something; but walking a village street was a new and delightful thing.

So Mary's spirit was soothed; and, when Alice got a chance to ask, without notice by the little girl, how things went, she replied with a high gleam in her eye and smiling lips, "Just as you know they would go!"

"But what did you tell them, Mary," Alice begged.

"Told 'em I stole her!"

"Mary! You know they would not believe that!"

"Just as good as anything else to tell them," Mary persisted. "The town is in a perfect ferment by now. It had to blow up,

you know as well as I, and the quicker the better. I shall never tell them anything different."

"Mary Halsey, you are terrible!"

CHAPTER VII

MONDAY

THE high gleam held in Mary Halsey's eye next morning, as she started an hour late for work; and, for some distance down the street, her mind kept pace with hurrying strides as she worked out the new problem before her—how she was going to adapt herself to the town's new interpretation of her personality, which would come with the adoption of "Uncle Mary." Life had all along been shaping her exterior just as it willed, without regard to the real Mary Halsey, so at variance—and now, here was this! She had even dreamed before Libbie Lee came that the child, somehow, might forget and call her "Mother," sometimes—and later come to apply the sweet name altogether! Oh, wonder of wonders!

Instead, here she was in two days fixed

with the name of Uncle Mary! Her mind was taking it up afresh, because she expected to hear it the first thing when she arrived at the house where she was engaged for the day. She was sewing at the Turners' that day and her strong hand was soon at the old-fashioned jingling door-bell.

"Come right in, Mary," bustled Mrs. Turner, an active, bright-eyed, nervous little woman, glancing at the clock to show that she had taken note of the lost hour, though it was the first time any one had ever known Mary to be late.

"The sun got tangled up in its orbits this morning and all the things tied to it, like sewers-by-the-day, lost a whole hour," said Mary coolly.

"You don't say," returned Mrs. Turner, nonplussed. She had been at high tension for at least fifty-nine minutes over Mary's delay; and, though no one could ever forecast what Mary might say, she did not expect any such fantastic reason as the one Mary gave. Marvel of marvels, Mrs. Tur-

ner had not heard the news! Such a relief it was to Mary! But she was never a time-waster on any account; so, picking up a piece of goods, she said, just as though there had been no momentous changes in her life and that she had come in at the expected moment,—"How do you want this skirt cut—gored or straight?"

Mrs. Turner could hardly gather herself together after her anxiety over the lost hour, sufficiently to determine this basic question, though in reality its discussion was a formula they always went through with unvarying result.

"Why,—it takes less to gore, always." A cardinal point with Mrs. Turner.

"But your hips need the fullness of a straight skirt," cut in Mary.

"Y-e-s, they do," reluctantly admitted Mrs. Turner; "but don't you think you might take a mite off the sides for patches?"

"No," said Mary firmly, "for you'd have patches to put on the sooner if I made your house-dresses tight around the hips. How

much in this pattern, anyway?" she went on, measuring off the goods as she spoke, knowing well that it would be just a bit under full requirements.

Mrs. Turner grew nervous over the rapidly estimating fingers. "Why,—it seemed to me that piece of gingham was a mite wide, and that a little less would do—"

"Mrs. Turner," put in Mary, "you're going to skimp your white sky-robe if the Lord lets you have the buying of the goods."

"Well, you'll never have any skimp in your tongue, Mary Halsey, if heaven don't change you any," retorted Mrs. Turner.

With this interchange of pleasantries the air was entirely clear, and Mary's scissors and needle flew when the machine did not hum, while Mrs. Turner bent all her energy to putting things to Mary's hand, that as much as possible might be accomplished in the limited portion of the day remaining with one whole hour already deducted! Of course Mary would not charge for that hour, such a thing would be unthinkable; but,

nevertheless, there was economic waste where one got ready for work one hour before work actually began! Mrs. Turner did not formulate all this—it would have wasted too much time, but she had the sense of need for catching up, which spurred her on to the utmost.

Mary's secret was not out till little Carrie Turner came in from school. She had been sick the day before, which kept her and her mother away from church. Now, she had hurried home to tell about the little girl Mary Halsey had brought to Sunday School. Mary distinctly heard the high treble excitedly exclaiming in the kitchen, "And she calls her Uncle Mary, Mamma!"

As soon as possible, thereafter, Mrs. Turner was at hand with her questions, even forgetting for the moment that they might possibly delay Mary in her work.

"Carrie says you brought a little girl to Sunday School yesterday morning," with aggressive inquisitional inflection.

"She didn't lie," returned Mary.

"Where did she come from?" pursued Mrs. Turner, with the air of an indisputable right to know.

"I presume the stork brought her as he does other children," said Mary.

Mrs. Turner was exasperated: "Mary Halsey, where did you get her?"

"I stole her," replied Mary coolly.

Mrs. Turner was speechless.

Monday typified Mary's experiences for the week and then life turned a new page for her.

CHAPTER VIII

SURPRISES GATHER

After the first high tension of receiving Libbie Lee and fitting her into the quiet old brown cottage—which was much like fitting a new-blown rose into an old brown bottle—and the greater strain of allowing the town to look, gasp and gossip for even more than the allotted nine days, things settled somewhat into routine for the little household of three. Mary cancelled all her engagements for sewing after the first week, for a second letter had come from the bank making it clear that they wished her to give all her time to the child and to receive full remuneration therefor. So the town was left gasping again; for how could they keep themselves and their children covered if Mary did not come at least twice a year and help them out? There was consternation,

indeed—and it did Mary's soul good! Ten years was long enough to be measuring people's bodies, and incidentally their souls, while she felt her own grow daily more cramped and unlovely. No proclamation of freedom ever brought greater joy than Mary's canceling of sewing engagements brought to her. Her head fairly felt light from the dropped burden, and the "Uncle Mary" which had come simultaneously with it, when once squarely accepted, only added to the light-headedness aforesaid.

Alice began to protest along altogether new lines, especially after almost two months had passed and another terse letter had come from the New York bank officials. It read:

Miss Mary Halsey,

Dear Madame: We beg to say that a modern limousine with competent chauffeur is to be placed at your disposal so soon as you advise us that your barn has been made ready for its occupancy, and that you have secured a boarding place for the chauffeur, who is a young man in whom you can place every confidence and who will make a pleasant boarder for any village family who might feel they

could accommodate him. All expenses of the car will be met here.

Hoping to hear from you as promptly as possible, we are,

Yours, etc.

This was just as though a sky-rocket had suddenly shot up into the blue above the little old brown cottage and dropped a shower of golden and red stars upon it. Mary and Alice were too excited for words —and words they were most careful not to use before Libbie Lee; for that it must come as a matter of course to the child, was Mary's instant decision.

But Alice had exclaimed when first the letter was read to her—"You won't take it Mary, will you?"

"Why not," Mary had returned.

"What will people say?" Alice helplessly added.

Mary returned a scornful look as answer and tossed that new light head of hers, then went immediately to the old barn to look after its possibilities for a garage. She decided that very little would really have to be

done. There were two big doors in front, a good floor and a good roof, with a slight incline leading up to the doors, and a roadway that went out by the side of the cottage. The whole would simply have to be cleaned up and some new boards placed in the incline.

When she returned to the house Libbie Lee was at Alice's knee listening to a story from a book, and this picture of the two struck the jealous spot in Mary's nature, as it always did. She said instantly, "Elizabeth Lee run out and play with the kitty a few minutes. I want to talk with Alice."

The child always obeyed, because obedience was a thing she had learned thoroughly at the "Home," but she exchanged longing looks with Auntie Alice all the very slow way out of the room, while Mary's lips set into straight lines. She hoped Alice would disagree with her about something so she could be firm in speech, but Alice was too happy in the child's love to disagree about

anything just then, so Mary told about the barn very briefly, and said she was going out to get Sam Oldham to put the new boards in and clean up the barn and road. Then too, she would see if Sam's wife wouldn't take the chauffeur to board and "everything would be done with only two tongues to wag about it," she ended, letting off some of her irritation in this acrid conclusion.

"Now, Mary," protested Alice, "you know Sam and his wife are quiet folks always, just minding their own business."

"Yes, I do know it, and that's why I have thought of them," Mary admitted with a slow smile, which if Alice had been suspicious, might have seemed suggestive.

In fact that light-headedness of Mary's had led her to plan another, and if possible even greater, sensation than she had already given the little town. She did not want a hint of the coming auto and chauffeur to reach village ears until some fine day when she and Elizabeth Lee should ride in state through the village streets!

Saying to Alice, finally, "Let the child stay out-doors and play with the kitten,—the fresh air will do her good," (instructions which were instantly ignored) Mary hurried away to see Sam and his wife.

She found both at home, Sam limping about in his shop, his thin, patient face set in lines of suffering, while his wife bent over the wash tub. Mary soon put before them her business and found prompt agreement on the part of both. Then she smiled her grimmest smile and said:

"Now, Sam and Maggie, you both know this town," (forgetting that in reality it was not unlike other towns in its interest, perfectly natural and legitimate, in unusual happenings), "and I don't want it talking about my affairs. It has talked about me enough lately."

Sam and Maggie smiled understandingly back at her, and instantly said that neither would speak of her affairs, or of what they were intending to do themselves. Maggie added that she would have to notify some

folks that she could not wash for them any longer, but she would give no reason beyond the one, which was true, that she was going to rest a little from washing.

And Mary went down the street, after leaving them, with the joy of freedom for another to make her blood run gayly.

"Maggie Oldham has slaved for other folks even longer than I have, and how good it is going to seem to think of unbending her back and letting her make her table pretty for a boarder—which I could see in her eye she was going to do—and let things come a little easier to Sam, who can't do much with that old hurt in his hip always to nag him." And the joy of easing the burden of others brought a flush to Mary's face and a soft light to her eyes that would have amazed any villager who might have met her just then.

Sam pushed along the work about the barn, while Maggie made ready for her boarder, and it was not a week before Mary was able to write to the New York bank that

everything was in readiness for the car and chauffeur.

The next few days were full of excitement and expectation at the little brown cottage. Though Libbie Lee didn't know a word about it, she reveled in the gayety that pervaded its atmosphere.

CHAPTER IX

NEW FEATHERS

DURING the wait for arrival of the limousine and chauffeur, Mary had been turning several things over in that suddenly lightened head of hers. So, on Saturday afternoon of a crisp day, with snow covering the ground, packed nice and hard, she announced to Alice that she was going over to Barringer and do a few errands.

It was most casually stated, but Alice responded with consternation. They did not need a thing, and trips to Barringer were always few and far between!

"I am not going to take Elizabeth Lee with me," Mary went on, unperturbed, "so you can have her all to yourself." This was added grudgingly, but it was inevitable from several points of view, and brought

the quick smile to Alice as she looked over at Libbie Lee, while that little silent listener flew at once to the arms she loved which rested upon the rolling chair.

"We'll have a good time, won't we, Auntie Alice?"

Mary turned abruptly away and almost immediately, with hat and coat dashed on, strode out the front door.

Alice instantly took herself to task. Mary was so good to her, she told herself; *supported* her—that was the word for it—and saw that she had every care. What a wretch she was to try to steal the heart of Mary's child from her! Libbie Lee was Mary's child. There was no denying that, and Alice should be cold and reserved toward the little thing. That was the proper attitude for her. But, Oh, how could she be? It was simply impossible. She must try, though, to make the child love Mary more, show her more affection. So she set herself the task for that afternoon. However, it seemed very hard to keep the child's

attention when the matter was really taken in hand. Libbie Lee wanted to talk about the sparrows on the window-sill, or have Auntie Alice "read a story" to her, and altogether Mary's heart would not have been particularly soothed with the lame effects of Alice's first lesson in teaching Libbie Lee to love "Uncle Mary" more.

But Mary had gone out in the crisp air and up the street to a neighbor from whom she had hired a sleigh for the afternoon. A few minutes later she was driving an old gray horse and dilapidated cutter along the roadway, past the little brown cottage and on and on toward Barringer, entirely unconscious of Alice's praiseworthy efforts. The nostrils of the old horse dilated in the crisp, wintry air, and it was so good to be out that he sent his hoofs flying with an almost frolicsome thrust. As a result they fairly flew by the Halsey cottage and Mary did not turn her head once for observation in that direction. Her spirits lightened rapidly, however, responding, even as did

the old horse, to New England's winter elixir.

"Well, old Gray," she said aloud, as they speeded along, "we're pretty old-fashioned, you and I, stiff and dull in the bargain, but we will show them that there is 'come back' in us yet. You are doing it already, and I will show Sunfield that I can, before many moons."

Her cheeks glowed with the keen air, and the high gleam of her eye gave the rest of her message to old Gray through the back of his long ears; but it all seemed satisfactory to him, for he did not check his gait, and they continued to speed rapidly over the miles they were to travel, till Barringer was promptly reached.

Mary's plans were very definitely made. She tied old Gray in the church sheds, just on the edge of town; then went first to a hairdresser's where she was absolutely unknown, and made immediate arrangements to have her hair dressed. Seated by the table, with all the implements at hand and

a very suave young person ready to begin, a feeling of panic suddenly seized her, which of course was instantly put down, and with such vigor that the young person in waiting almost jumped as Mary blurted out:

"Now, don't look at me and think I don't know anything what style is, that just anything will do for me. I want my hair done in the latest twist, or wrinkle, whatever it is."

"For evening then, I suppose," returned the girl, with pert insinuation in resentment of Mary's tone.

"No," returned Mary, shortly, "for breakfast, dinner and supper."

The lady in charge, not quite liking the tones which reached her, was quietly on the spot, and tactfully considered what style would be most becoming for the new customer, with the result that Mary received excellent attention; and, when she looked at the finished product as it came from the girl's skillful fingers, she flushed to the tip

of her brow at the transformation it had made in her. The hair had been softly marcelled, or to put it more correctly, it had been coaxed to lie in its own soft waves, with a little mass of locks resting upon her forehead, and at either side it had been put artistically back to cover all but the tip of her well-shaped ears. It was hard for Mary to believe that the vision sent back to her by the mirror was really her own. She bit her lips red to keep them from trembling, and without a word of commendation or dissatisfaction, she paid her bill and hurried out of the shop. She stopped next at the first general store beyond and bought a thick veil which she tied tightly over her hair and hat.

Then, with courage restored, she began looking for gown and wrap and hat, for she meant to complete the transformation. The first two purchases were not difficult. Mary knew what pretty clothes were, if she had not worn them since she was a very young girl. She bought a lovely brown satin dress

with self-colored embroidered stripes edged with tiny threads of gold, and a touch of burnt orange about the neck and sleeves and waist line. It was most becoming, but it was above her shoe-tops in length, and soon there were high brown shoes and silk stockings to match the dress! The wrap was of warm brown velour, long and loose, with beautiful seal fur about the throat and hands. Attired in the new things, she removed the sheltering veil and said brusquely.

"Now, I want a hat."

The plain out-of-dateness of the hat she had on, made the saleslady who had sold the dress and wrap, smile involuntarily, but she instantly subdued it and said with great cordiality, "Let me take you at once over to the department."

There Mary did not feel so sure of her ability to choose; and, between a sudden sense of weakening at the demands of a new field of investigation, and a saleslady's urgency, she finally purchased a hat of ultra

style, that was becoming, but quite startling for any quiet inhabitant of Sunfield. It repeated in waving plumes the burnt orange of the dress trimming, and went off at rather a rakish angle to the left side. The hour was growing late, however, and Mary hastily told the sales-people to wrap it up, while she returned to the dress department, gathered up her old things and made haste back to old Gray. Of course common sense would have dictated the packing up of all the new things and wearing of the old ones back home. But that was not in Mary's plan—common sense was, for the time being, not her key-note. It was dusk by this time, and Mary had meant it to be.

When she hurried around to take the blanket from old Gray's back, he gave her a glad whinney of welcome, but as she went to his head to untie him and put back his bridle, he turned to give her further welcome, when lo! she flashed her lantern into his face, lighting up her own at the same time, and a stranger looked upon him! He had known

Mary practically all his life, and he was about to rebel at being carried off by some one he did not know, when Mary laughed in a quick rush of humor, as she said, "Well, old Gray, if you don't know me, I'm afraid my family will turn me out of house and home when I appear to them!"

But voices mean much more than looks to horses, and entirely re-assured, old Gray whinnied to her again in response, and the two started gayly off.

They covered the road even more quickly coming back than going, and it was little more than an hour when Mary let old Gray walk out of the shafts in his own barn, back to his stall for his waiting supper; and then, locking the barn door, started rapidly back to the little brown cottage. She smiled as she thought how her feminine ancestors would have cried out at her for entering a barn in all that finery. But she did not allow herself breath to think how she was going to meet Alice's consternation. She kept her thought upon the sharp tingle

above her shoe tops where thin silk stockings met the crisp night air as she flew along the walk and hurried into her own door like —well, like a being from another world! For so she seemed to Alice, as she looked up when the door was thrown open and Mary stepped in!

Alice, indeed, had every reason to be totally unprepared for the apparition that presented itself to her when Mary burst into the door of the brown cottage. For had not that light-headed Mary deliberately withheld from her a letter from the New York bank of the week before which had insisted that the money sent monthly for the maintenance of Elizabeth Lee Starling was intended not only for her board and any other needs which might develop for her, but was also intended for the household, that everything might be in keeping with desired standards in the rearing of the aforesaid Elizabeth Lee. It was earnestly hoped, therefore, that Miss Halsey would not hesitate to equip herself personally with

anything needful, since every confidence rested in Miss Halsey's judgment and integrity.

Mary Halsey's love for beautiful clothes had, on the instant, begun to unfold. It had always been there, in fact, but trampled on and crushed through the past ten years till it was an utterly lifeless thing. Freeing it, at last, with a sudden shock, had contributed to that bit of light-headedness. But there was another underlying motive which led her to keep this letter of instructions and its effects secret; this was the rapidly growing bond between Alice and Libbie Lee, which left Mary out and stifled every bit of affectionate demonstration of which Mary had dreamed. Now, here was Mary's chance! She would transform herself with pretty clothes! For the child, she would make herself lovely to look upon! And Alice could not go out to wear pretty things, so her conscience would be perfectly easy in buying nothing for Alice. She would out-do Alice by her clothes!

Hence, it was a dramatic moment all round, when Mary burst in at the front door and stood a moment with flaming cheeks and sparkling eyes before Alice, with Libbie Lee leaning against her knees.

It was a speechless moment also, during which Alice for a fraction of time really failed to recognize her sister, and Libbie Lee was equally bewildered.

Of course it was the child who spoke first.

"Oh, Oh!" she cried, clasping her hands ecstatically. "How pretty you are, Uncle Mary!"

Was there ever balm sweeter, to human heart than that little spontaneous cry! And Mary wanted with all her soul to rush forward and fold the little thing against her soft new furs! But it was as impossible as for a lumbering elephant to suddenly take wings, she told herself afterward. As for Libbie Lee, there was not the least impulse toward demonstration of affection. She simply stood and admired.

"'WHAT ARE YOU STARING AT, ALICE HALSEY?'"

The dramatic moment was over and Mary's tongue was loosened.

"What are you staring at, Alice Halsey? Anybody would think you had never seen any new things in your life."

"Mary!" was all that Alice could articulate, whereupon Mary, the lumbering elephant of her own designation, with a few ungainly strides reached the bedroom and quickly laid aside the hat of flaming burnt orange, unfastened and hung up her new wrap; then, arrayed in the rest of her finery, she made haste to the kitchen to prepare the tea. Her passage through the sitting room was wordless, for she wanted no protest, or even exclamation over the unsuitability of her costume for the kitchen, or comments upon her stylish coiffure. By the time tea was ready to put on the table, however, she had regained her adamant poise, and held her head as though her outfit were a thing perfectly familiar to her.

But when the three were seated at the table Libbie Lee could not take her eyes

from Uncle Mary's face. Finally she said:

"Uncle Mary, your hair is so pretty. Did you buy it when you went to town?"

"Yes," returned Mary, looking at Alice with a "you-keep-still" expression, "I bought it."

"Then you are going to wear it all the time, and *never* that you used to have, aren't you? It looked like some of my dresses I used to have at the Home—that were so tight on me," she said soberly.

Mary laughed and Alice was glad to follow suit. Without example she would not have dared, for the way Mary had long "plastered" her hair down, had been a matter of contention between the two, till Alice had given it up as hopeless some years before. The real source of Mary's laugh had been revived hope in the child's admiration for the transforming process.

They had hardly begun their tea, though, when a knock sounded upon the kitchen door, and Mary, with excited expectation, hurried to answer it. The bank's last letter

had said the car and the chauffeur would probably arrive by Saturday night.

She was met at the door by a young man of very neat appearance who tipped his cap with utmost courtesy as he said:

"I am Stafford, Jack Stafford, the chauffeur, sent by the —— bank to take charge of your car—that is if you are Miss Mary Halsey."

"I am," returned Mary, with quick composure.

"The car is in front, shall I bring it up the driveway?"

"Certainly," said Mary, "the garage is ready. I will bring you the key by the time you come in."

It was so like dreaming that the key was elusive, as Mary tried to pick it up; and her hand still trembled as the big car glided up to the old barn door, paused, and then thugged its impatience while the chauffeur stepped lightly down and, with lifted cap, took the key from Mary.

The barn door was shoved back on its

brand new runners, while Mary watched; then the car whirred impatiently again and moved gracefully into silence.

The young man returned to Mary with the key, and she at once told him of arrangements which she had made for his board, with directions as to where to find the Oldhams. She sat down a moment, limp, after he was gone.

"I don't believe I can ever do it," she whispered, and the lip which had long curled so scornfully upon the slightest occasion, trembled like that of a frightened child!

But she glanced at her dress and straightened instantly: "I've got it to do! And I am glad I've got some new clothes to help me live up to that chauffeur! Such airs! They might as well have sent me a college president!" Then she smiled grimly and went back to Alice and Libbie Lee—Alice, who was all excitement over the sounds which she could readily interpret, and Libbie Lee wondering what was going

on, but too well trained in obedience to be leaving the table and going off on investigations.

Alice looked up inquiringly and Mary simply said, "It has come, and the man with it," which ended the matter till after Libbie Lee was fast asleep—then the questions had to come.

"Mary, what does it look like?" Alice said eagerly.

"A beautiful car, of dark blue, I should say."

"Oh, if I could only see it," breathed Alice in rare expression of desires that were beyond the possibilities of a wheel chair.

"I wish you could," returned Mary; "and that chauffeur—I wish you could see his elegance! I am certainly glad I've got some clothes."

This brought Mary's outfit back to Alice's mind.

"Mary! You're never going to wear that hat—and everything—to church to-morrow, are you?"

"I most certainly am," returned Mary. "That's what I got them for!"

"But, Oh, Mary—do make some explanations—I'm so afraid people will say dreadful things!"

"Then let 'em! My life has been an open book before them, and now that I have simply turned a new page, let them do and say what they want to!"

"But this isn't an open page," pleaded Alice.

"No, not even to me," returned Mary, a bit wearily, but she instantly pulled herself up. "Yes, it is, too, and I know it is all right! This town has known me long enough to trust me without being shown my credentials for every move!"

"I am afraid no town on earth would ever do that when the moves are so startling as the ones you have already made lately." Alice's voice was weary, too, and they quickly made ready for bed.

Before they fell asleep, though, Mary said to Alice, "If you hear a rumpus out in that

barn to-night, you may know father's old cutter has picked up one of its broken shafts and is thrashing that new-fangled limousine." And they laughed together like two girls.

CHAPTER X

UNCLE MARY SHOCKS THE TOWN

THE next morning by eight o'clock the chauffeur's knock was at the door, and then his most deferential bow met Mary in her morning dress. He was a well-built, quiet young fellow, perfectly trained for his profession.

"Miss Halsey, I'd like the key, please, to put the car in order by the time you wish to use it," and there was the rising inflection at the close of his statement.

"At ten o'clock," Mary returned stiffly, while the chauffeur bowed again and hurried to the barn.

"That will never do!" Mary took herself to task, as she hurried about the kitchen. "How am I ever to be consistent, anyway —one moment the kitchen maid, which I must be, and the next a grand lady in a lim-

ousine!" But again came recognition of the thing which had shaped her life so far—"It's got to be!"

The usual Sunday processes were gone through. They had had their breakfasts, and not a word had been said to Libbie Lee about the car. She talked again of Mary's hair (whose perfection had been retained by use of a thick veil for sleeping), and when the little girl was being dressed for church and Sunday School, she lightly touched the pretty waves of soft brown tinged with gold, and said, "Oh, Uncle Mary, you are going to wear your pretty clothes too, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Mary, shortly, dreading more than any one could have dreamed the ordeal she was about to face. But there was the car in which she must ride, whether or no, and she might as well take everything at once, while Alice's opposing look helped to fix her determination.

Promptly at ten o'clock the beautiful dark blue car swept gracefully up to the little old brown cottage doorway with almost an

air of disdain, Mary thought, as she glanced out the bedroom window. But Libbie Lee happened to be standing at the glass front door, all dressed and ready to go. She drew in her breath with a big "Oh" as it came into view, and cried out: "Oh, Auntie Alice, that is the car I came out here in!"

Alice's wheels brought her instantly to the child's side, and with an arm about the little fur-clad shoulders, the two enjoyed the first glimpse together. Mary had intended to be on the spot, too, but getting on the new things took more time than she had allowed, and so she missed the carefully planned surprise. But she stepped to the door of the bedroom without delay and said more sharply than she meant:

"No, it is not, Elizabeth Lee! But it is one very much like it, and it is ours—yours and mine, to ride in every day all we please!"

"Auntie Alice's, too," urged the child, reaching up and patting the face so near hers.

"No, Libbie Love," said Alice quickly, "not Auntie Alice's because, you see, she cannot ride in it."

"But I will lift you up and put you right in it," protested the child, stoutly, "Or the man out there can."

"We won't think about that now, for you know riding might hurt Auntie Alice's back," she whispered close into the little girl's ear. And Libbie Lee knew no more must be said.

Meanwhile Mary's nervous hands had almost refused to put that giddy hat into place. "Libbie *Love!*" she cried indignantly to herself. "When did that begin? She is just trying to steal my child's heart from me! I meant to try to make a way for her to ride, but I won't do it now!" And anger for a moment ruled in Mary Halsey's heart as it never had done before. As for Alice and Libbie Lee, they were so excited over the lovely car that neither noticed the secret name which Auntie Alice had discovered for the little girl had slipped out,

and they never meant to tell *anybody* about it!

Mary came out at last with her head high and her nerves very firm. Anger is a good stiffener.

"Come, Elizabeth, we must go now," and the child, kissing Auntie Alice lovingly, ran out the open door and up to the long blue car.

The chauffeur was at the door ready to help the child in, and Mary stepped quickly in herself, quite as though she had ridden in limousines all her life.

"We will drive a bit in the country first, Stafford," she said, finding courage to use his name for the first time. "We do not have to be at the church until half past ten."

He bowed deferentially, and a moment later they were off.

Libbie Lee was delighted. She examined every item of the car's interior with happy childish interest, and nothing pleased her more than the little glass holders with their almost true to life, bunches of flowers. She

wondered much over them: "Didn't they grow *somewhere,* Uncle Mary?"

"Well, they grew under somebody's fingers who made them, just as a dress grows under mine."

"But God didn't make them," Libbie Lee ended, disappointedly.

"No," said Mary, smiling down at the little earnest face wistfully. Why was it that children seemed to love God and feel near to Him just naturally? She remembered that she did as a child. To feel that God made a thing was to lift it entirely above ordinary things. Then she flushed with sudden thought that she was getting far from that attitude of love and nearness.

But—things had been set for her to do—things that had been hard—things that were still hard, and she *had* them to do!

She straightened back on the luxurious cushions, while Libbie Lee prattled on. And the morning was glorious with sparkling

sunshine on the hard-packed snow, and they sped over it as though on wings, the motion of the car almost noiseless.

"Oh, Uncle Mary, that birdie couldn't keep up with us! She flew right along with us till her wings tired all out, then she dropped right down under the car! Do you think we mashed her?" was the tragic ending.

"No," returned Mary, "not a bit of it; she just swooped down after something she saw in the road."

The little confiding spirit, which was all hers in the car, as it had not been since the child came, brought a sudden lightness to Mary's heart which, with the charm of the ride itself, sent Mary at last to the church door (exactly at ten-thirty) with a return of the light-headedness which had marked the past week. So, while the gathering congregation almost stopped in their tracks as the car swung into place, and Mary, with Libbie Lee by the hand, stepped forth in all her finery, Mary herself was entirely com-

posed, bowing here and there quite naturally even though a bit hurriedly, for she did want to get into her place as quickly as possible.

The sermon did not mean much to her, of course, for once seated she could feel feminine eyes upon that hat, and she added scornfully to herself, "I'll bet the men are looking, too."

The minister was again pitted against fearful odds! But so earnestly did his fine old voice battle for the center of interest against that worldly thing in a front pew, that it reached out for spiritual verities as it had rarely been heard to do! Things had gone along the even tenor of their way with his people for so many years that he had fallen into comfortable lines. But, as Sophie Stoneham put it after the service was over and she was on her way home, "The church had come to be a regular moving picture show now, with Mary Halsey's doings!"

As for Mary, when service was out, she

was let absolutely alone; and so marked was it, that kind Mrs. Stillman, the minister's wife, hurried quickly to her side with a pleasant, unobserving, "How d'ye do," and a caress for Libbie Lee. Then the two principal actors, as Sophie Stoneham would have designated them, hurried on into the Sunday School room for the little ones of the congregation.

Mary had been to Sunday School with Libbie Lee every Sunday since she came, and had listened to Miranda Evans trying to teach the children. It was very stupid, Mary knew, but it was the kind of thing she had heard from Miranda when a child, and so she supposed it was all right. But her thought had been chiefly held by watching her own little new-found treasure, who sat on a bench and tried not to wriggle, or looked over at her for encouragement. To-day the other children looked with Libbie Lee, and so freely that Miranda finally said to Mary:

"You better come here and teach these

children; they are more interested in you than they are in me."

It was said sharply, with intent to cut Mary Halsey in her finery; so Mary replied promptly, "All right, I will." And she stepped right up to Miranda's place, while that dignitary took Mary's chair.

Mary knew the lesson, for she had taught it to Libbie Lee, and she amazed herself by teaching it to the children in a way that held their complete attention. She knew this was not altogether due to her finery, either. As for Miranda, when the lesson hour was over, she said to Mary, "I've taught this class fifty years. I'm done. You can take it."

Mary protested that she didn't want it, Miranda ought to keep it; but, though Miranda said never a word more, her resolve was taken.

CHAPTER XI

A LIMOUSINE CHRISTMAS

It was the Saturday before Christmas that the beautiful car had come to the brown cottage, and Mary had made her debut in fashionable finery. Her spirits being high, she determined that Christmas for her little girl should be one to be remembered. Why she herself, had never seen a real Christmas! When she and Alice were children, New England frugality still prevailed in the little cottage, and a simple gift for each was all they ever expected, or got. They hung up their stockings, it was true, and these next morning were full of candy, an orange, an apple and some raisins; but Christmas joy, like other kinds, must always be restrained joy. There must be no plunging out of bed at daylight, no riotous romping or hilarious merry-making. It was a time to look for-

ward to all the year, and then keep well within bounds when it arrived! Mary could see all this plainly now; and with the spirit of daring which was then upon her, she determined to wake the old cottage up with one real Christmas!

So, with the new car, she flew hither and thither gathering together Yule-tide accessories. On most of the trips Libbie Lee went, too,—because Mary's jealous heart refused to leave her much alone with Alice. And the little girl would stay obediently in the car, if Mary wanted to shop in secret; neither did the child show embarrassing curiosity as to the bundles, since her training had not included happy nosing after secrets "just before Christmas." The "Home" had been too big for that. But trips into the woods, when Sam Oldham sat in the seat with the chauffeur and carried an ax, were trips that the little girl did not make; and the big limousine on its return at dusk slipped quietly into the barn-garage before unloading.

Then came the time when Mary and Alice, Sam and the chauffeur worked on Christmas eve till far into the night, transforming the old cottage while the little girl slept.

To Alice's profound amazement, the first thing Mary did after the little one fell asleep, and before Sam and the chauffeur came, was to throw open a room on the opposite side of the little sitting room from theirs. It was a door that had not been opened for many a year--not since their father died, in fact.

Alice exclaimed: "Mary, Mary!" as it swung determinedly around under Mary's hand.

Mary set her lips and said nothing as she strode in and began at once to dismantle the room while Alice looked on, speechless, after the first exclamation.

Finally Mary remarked grimly, "Here is where I am going to have the Christmas tree, and I want to get the room swept up and dusted before Sam and Stafford get here."

"No,—Oh, Mary, don't!" cried Alice. Then, as Mary worked on without a word, she cried again:

"Why can't you have it in the sitting-room? That is where everybody puts a Christmas tree!"

"That's the reason I don't want it there," returned Mary. "I don't want everybody seeing it from the street and coming in from curiosity. I am going to have it here," she ended with finality.

Of course it was useless to argue over the matter, and Alice silently watched Mary's flying hands as she swept up the dust of years and put to rights a little bedroom which held only an old-fashioned day-bed, a table and some chairs. It was here that their brother had slept from a little boy till the night before he left home. It was a simple thing to gather up the clean dirt of a country house, even though of years' standing, and to "put it to rights." When it was thoroughly gone over with broom and duster, Mary was ready for the men, whom

she had purposely asked to come an hour later than the little girl's bedtime that she might have opportunity to put it in such shape that no questions would come to the minds of either.

As they waited a few moments for the helpers, Alice relaxed with the thought of how much pleasanter it was going to be with that room opened from the sitting room! And, perhaps, Mary's opening it meant a little less of bitterness in her heart toward Elwood. But Mary's face did not promise much as Alice searched it. Still, just having the room open might do something, and Alice hoped. It was Christmas eve, too, and Alice had been full of joy at the thought of making it a wonderful time for the little girl, who grew dearer and dearer each day. The child was the greatest joy that ever came into Alice's limited life; and so, with Christmas-making in her blood, she could not brood or question over-much.

A knock sounded at the back door, and Mary hurried out to let Sam and Stafford

in. Then the real work began. The stored-up treasures from the woods were brought into the house from the barn-garage; the Christmas tree was set up in the "north bedroom," as Mary immediately called it, where first a soft rug had been spread upon the floor. Then Mary opened her bundles from the shops, and brought out a beautiful cover for the day-bed, and marvelous things for the Christmas tree: tinsels of all sorts, candles, balls and little gifts; kitties and dogs, rabbits and squirrels; birds and angels that hovered about the branches, and innumerable horns and bells and whistles. Nothing was lacking for this wonderful tree. Evergreens were tacked about the walls and over the windows, from which hung dainty lace curtains; and, lastly, handsome gifts for the child were laid out on the day-bed. It was a bower of beauty that almost took Alice's breath away as she looked at the finished product, while Mary's eyes gleamed with brilliant high-lights.

Sam, quiet though he was, could not for-

bear smiling and saying, "That's the purtiest thing my eyes ever laid on"; and the chauffeur, who might be supposed to have seen many finer and more beautiful things in metropolitan homes where he had served, nodded and smiled in polite agreement.

"Now, we must do the sitting room," said Mary; and a similar transformation took place there. Evergreens hung from the walls, rested upon the window and door frames and adorned the few pictures while candles were securely fitted here and there in safe places. It was as pretty as the Christmas tree room, they thought, when it was done, and they could look at it after the men had gone. Then Mary brought a gay and beautiful Christmas breakfast cover for the table, and set it with some rare old china that was the little cottage's most valuable possession. It had been handed down from the Halsey ancestor who had first come over from England. Alice looked on it all with delight that equaled Mary's pent-up joy.

"How are you going to manage it?" came a final question from Alice.

"I am going to get up before day, light the candles and stir up the base-burner. Then, when everything is ready, I am going to call Elizabeth and tell her Christmas is here, and I know she will be ready to fly up and see things!"

Alice laughed in responsive anticipation, even though prudent care of the child made her say, "But don't you think it would really be better to wait later and let her get her sleep out?"

"No," said Mary emphatically. "We were always kept in bed Christmas morning till we nearly died of waiting, and I am going to have this child ready for all the fun she can get out of it."

"Even if you have to wake her to get it," laughed Alice again.

"Yes; for of course they could not have children in the Home up and flying about at all hours of the morning, even if it was Christmas; and so she is not full of day-

light-getting-up-ideas, as we were. But I want her to have it all!"

"Jimmie and Anna Stillwell were always allowed to get up whenever they waked, I remember," said Alice, "and that was what made us so crazy to do it, too."

Mary's lips set at this, for she did not like arousing old memories. Jimmie Stillwell and Elwood had almost lived together as boys.

This little rift in their joy made them both conscious of how tired they were; and, with a last look, they undressed and crept into bed.

How much these two slept need not be estimated or recorded, but Mary flashed on an electric pocket-light, which she had kept by her bed since the little stranger came, and her father's watch, which was always under her pillow, said it was half-past five o'clock. So she crept out of bed, dressed, noiselessly stirred the sitting room fire, and, with long tapers, set blazing in the winter morning all the candles in both the rooms

they had decorated. Then she crept back under the bed covers till everything should warm up, for it was a biting Christmas morning.

Of course Alice was awake the moment Mary stirred, and was soon slipping on her clothes, for she meant to be as far ready as possible, so that Mary would have no excuse for leaving her out—which Mary really had no intention of doing. But there was never any telling about Mary, Alice had come to feel. So, cold or no cold, she was ready with just a little help from Mary to slip into her wheel chair.

When Mary stirred the next time, Alice whispered almost imploringly, "Get me up first, Mary, please!"

"All right," Mary whispered back. "You ready?"

"Yes, oh, yes," came from Alice excitedly, "I'm ready now!"

Mary stole around the beds and promptly had her sister in the wheel chair. Then came the most exciting moment! The wak-

ing of that small sleeping treasure in her little be-frilled bed,—for she had never had another, since she so loved that little bed from the first. The two women looked breathlessly down upon her under Mary's electric light.

The child stirred, as one will through some strange influence of being closely watched in sleep. Then the brown eyes opened suddenly; and when she saw the two, she smiled and said, sleepily, "Has day come?"

"Yes," cried Mary, in trembling glee, "day has come, and brought—what do you guess?"

"Christmas!" cried the child, springing immediately up. For hadn't they talked Christmas all the week?

"Yes, yes! Christmas is here," cried Alice and Mary together. "We'll hustle out as fast as we can and see it," went on Mary, slipping on warm stockings and the softest and downiest of little robes which had come in the child's trunk, and which Mary always hung at the foot of her bed at

night. Then, with warm slippers on the small feet, the child flew from Mary's hand, at last, in joyous search of "Christmas." And the old story of happy childhood, and tired, but even more deeply happy grown-ups, was enacted in all its fullness for the first time, perhaps, in the little brown cottage with its fine Puritan principles, but its frugal and awful restraints.

"Oh, how pretty, how pretty the tree is!" cried Libbie Lee over and over, while she hugged a big doll whose wardrobe Mary and Alice had worked over for a month of nights while the child slept, and which now lay in orderly fashion in a big doll trunk standing on top of the old day-bed. Her gayety and joy over everything as it was disclosed, proved all that Mary and Alice could ask, until suddenly the small face sobered, and then she said plaintively: "Oh, I wish the children in the 'Home' could see it all! And I would let Emma have this little chair, and little Billie this horn! He would just blow and blow it, and make such

a big noise!" And she laughed in gay recollection only to sober again, instantly, as she ran to Mary and pleaded, "Oh, Uncle Mary, couldn't we go to the 'Home' and bring them here?"

Of course the child had little idea of distance, and the yearning for those others to share in all this bounteous joy—Emma and Billie and all the rest, who were having so little—came to her not at all as budding altruism, but as a child's natural longing for those of its kind in Christmas joy. This must be the conscious or unconscious lament of every little one who revels alone in Christmas bounty.

But Mary had not counted on this. She had only thought of filling full the cup for this one child of her heart. That something should be lacking, made her almost impatient for a moment, while she answered, "No, no! That is too far away, we could not go. But see! Look at this old Santy with his reindeer and sled! You haven't seen how fast he can go over roofs, yet."

And there was a little house under the Christmas tree, so Mary drove the prancing team right up over its sloping roof, while Libbie Lee with returning spirits laughed in glee, and then must do it, too.

They were seated at the breakfast table, at last, and there was a final small gift at the little girl's plate. A pretty wee handkerchief which Auntie Alice had made for her, with a nice Christmas card tied to it.

When Mary had read for her what the card said, the child still had joy left for the new gift.

"Did you make it all yourself, Auntie Alice?" she said.

"All myself," returned smiling Auntie Alice, who realized to the full, nevertheless, that there were few things she could do "all by herself."

The little girl's face sobered again. "I —I haven't made anything or given anything to anybody!"

The little lips that quivered were a stab to Mary's heart as she realized that she had

left the most important thing of all out of this wonderful Christmas: The spirit of the Christ-child for her small charge. She did not know how to find Emma and Billie and all the rest—and she didn't want to know—but there were poor children in Sunfield whose Christmas she might have allowed the little girl to brighten.

CHAPTER XII

A FRIEND AT COURT

DURING the week that preceded Christmas and those that immediately followed, nobody within reach of Sunfield failed of an opportunity to see that gorgeous limousine with the perfectly up-to-date young chauffeur; and Mary Halsey's burnt orange plumes nodded almost saucily from the luxurious rear seat, the on-lookers thought, while Libbie Lee's delighted face, amid soft encircling furs, peeped out at them from some car window. How the child loved to ride! And Mary simply shoved her old New England conscience far into the background of her life, as she enjoyed to the full the hours that she could spend with "her child" alone. She even took up the old dream of the "husband" again, which had largely dropped from her consciousness

since the coming of the child. "He is doing business in the city," she said, in gay make-believe to herself, while they went skimming over snow-packed roads, Libbie Lee chattering about everything they passed, and asking innumerable questions.

They went shopping often in Barringer, and Mary bought more things for herself, since Libbie Lee needed nothing; she bought no extravagant things, but a few pretty and becoming gowns which really transformed her from a drab drudge to a modern up-to-date young woman. Her complexion was fresh, and improving in texture under the new care which Mary was surreptitiously giving it. Her hair was growing prettier each day under the hair-dresser's occasional hand and teaching, while Libbie Lee's interest in every process was most lively.

"Uncle Mary, you are getting to be the beautifullest thing I ever saw," she would exclaim with little clasped hands. But it was to Alice's arms that she ran when they

returned to the little brown cottage! So Mary's face still held the lines of scornful fighting against things she couldn't change. She made no calls on neighbors; in fact calling, or "running in," in Sunfield parlance, to see friends, was a thing given up many years ago, following the avalanche of trouble which had come upon them together with the beginning of strain for every nerve in Mary's body to support herself and Alice, and to keep the "chains" that the old secretary held from pressing too hard upon her and the little brown cottage. If it had been otherwise—if she could have had fellowship in neighborly ways with the town's people, the angular lines in Mary's face and character might not have been there. But —"ifs" are always in waiting for humanity, and Mary could not escape hers. It so happened, too, that people had come to do their "running in" at the Halsey's when Mary was away sewing; "because Alice was alone so much," they said, but most of them "got quite enough of Mary's sharp tongue,"

Sophie Stoneham would have told you, when she was sewing at their various homes, and were willing to leave it out of possibility in their calls upon Alice.

Now that old neighbors and friends watched her from front windows as her burnt orange plumes flew past, or caught glimpses of her short skirts, it is no wonder that the town was in a gale of laughter and comment.

There would come a sudden whirr on the still winter air and Sophie Stoneham, with one bound, was at the front pane—winded, but still able to gasp, "Mary Halsey will be the death of me yet!" And she strained to see if there was a different dress on this time! Then, with the motor faintly whirring off in the distance, she would make her way back to her work in the kitchen with the scornful remark, "Selfish thing! Nobody knows what right she's got to it, either! She'll get a come-down yet if I don't miss my guess!"

Every day when Carrie came home from

school, Mrs. Turner, whose house set far back from the road, would ask, "Did you see Mary in that car to-day?"

"Yes, Ma, and Libbie Lee looked at me and smiled, but Mary didn't turn her head. I so wished she would pick me up and take me just a little, teeny ways."

"Well, you needn't wish, for Mary Halsey ain't going to take you nor anybody else in that car. It's perfectly shameful the way she has left us all with our sewing to do—and then riding 'round like a queen right under our eyes!" she ended sourly.

People met in the street with exclamations: "Have you seen her?" "Mercy, yes! A body could see them plumes from Mt. Pisgah any day!" "Wonder if Mary Halsey thinks she's sixteen?" "How old is she, anyway?" "She's twenty-seven if she's a day, for I remember—" and then followed the fatal accuracy of related occurrences in a small community.

The village wag brought forth this: "Mary Halsey is as big a surprise to this

town as if one o' my onions had sprouted a sunflower!"

After a few weeks of lively reaction on the part of the people, Mr. Stillwell, the village pastor for many years, was walking along the road with bent head, when he, too, caught the whirr of Mary's coming car. He halted instantly, and stepping into the roadway, held up his cane quite authoritatively. The chauffeur slowed down and tipped his cap respectfully. Mr. Stillwell bowed in response, then stepped up to the door of the car on the side where Mary sat. She stared for a moment without making a move, but the chauffeur was on the ground in an instant and had the door open.

Mr. Stillwell smiled ingratiatingly at Mary, putting unconsciously a new element in his old kindly manner; then he said, "Mary, won't you let your old pastor have a ride in your new-fangled outfit?"

There was no refusing this even by the crustiest of crusty people, which Mary was really far from being. She was simply in

the crucible which was shaping her life and character, with first one angle, then another, presented for the transforming process.

"Why, yes, Mr. Stillwell," she said, at last, rather stiffly. "Elizabeth Lee you can sit in front," and she reached to pull down one of the extra seats, when Mr. Stillwell laid a firm hand on hers.

"No, Mary," he said, "I am going to put little Elizabeth Lee on the front seat with your good chauffeur. I know she will love to sit there and look out at the front," with a compelling smile for the child.

But Libbie Lee and the waiting chauffeur both turned toward Mary for instruction, and Mary could not, for the life of her, do otherwise than nod her consent to the chauffeur and say to Elizabeth Lee, "Very well, you may sit there a *very* little while!"

A most adroit hint to the self-invited visitor, which he proceeded at once to ignore. Settling his long body back against the soft upholstery of the car, he looked

about the interior, as they started off again, with much satisfaction.

"Look here, Mary, this thing just about suits me! It fits my rheumatic legs to perfection. I wonder I never thought of it before! If I had, this town would certainly have had to get one long before this." And his whimsical smile was a thing no one could resist. Mary's heart grudgingly warmed to it.

"I'm *mighty* glad, as southern folks say, that you've got it. You deserve it, Mary. You've worked hard, child, and I fairly revel in the sight of you, whirring around the streets and sending the rest of us scurrying, with the chickens and the dogs, to cover."

"I guess you are the only one that does enjoy seeing me with it," Mary returned in quiet scorn.

"No, Mary, no. You are mistaken there. With the hard years that have fallen to you, you have somehow gotten it into your head that the town's against you. But it isn't."

"You can't tell me," returned Mary with spirit. "You see I have been too close to all of them, sewing in their homes. I've seen Joe Steel sullen and mean to his wife when she was sick and helpless; I've seen Mag Turner skim the last shadow of cream off the milk she had to sell, and I've seen Sophie Stoneham strip the last shred of decency from a young girl's reputation, and they all hate me for it."

"Well, we will let them all alone, though I think you are mistaken in what you say. The greatest damage has come to you from your own heart," and he sat back with sudden firmness. "It is your own reaction to these close contacts that has made you cynical and uncharitable."

Mary recognized the truth of this, though she made no reply, and her lips took on their old firm set.

"No, Mary, I am not talking about individuals—every town has its assortment. Why, we would all stagnate if we didn't have some folks with bristles to stir us up

at times! But I am talking about the town as a whole; I know how it feels toward you for I have taken pains to find out." He did not add that he had gone about protecting her. "It is glad you have the little girl, wherever she may have come from, and glad you have the beautiful car to ride in—and nobody but me is going to ask you to let them ride in it. You see I couldn't wait—it fits my rheumatic legs so well."

And Mary and he laughed together over that, but Mary quickly sobered: "I am sure Sophie Stoneham has been able to manufacture some dark, hidden chapter in my life to account for it all."

"No, she has not," he replied firmly,—but he did not tell her that he had stopped the wheels of Sophie's gossip factory before she could turn out the finished product. "Sophie has had her fling over your riding around in style, but there has been nothing evil in it.

"Nevertheless, Mary, I want to talk with you about this thing. You really owe it to

us to give some explanation. Now take me, for instance, I am so curious to know how it all came about that I don't sleep good nights!"

They laughed together again in real comradeship, and then Mary said with forced lightness:

"Well, I'm curious on my part, to know what conclusion you have all come to when you have been lying awake nights—for I am sure you are not the only one who has lain awake."

The minister waited a while before speaking; at last he turned and looked at her with tears in his eyes—for he loved his people, and it was a keen, long-standing regret that he could never speak to the Halsey girls about the supposedly erring brother.

"Mary, we all think the child is Elwood's; that his wife has probably died, that he has made plenty of money, and that he wants you and Alice to bring up the child in the old home he still loves."

"No," Mary cried, "the child is *mine,* it was sent to me!"

"Yes, yes," said the minister soothingly. "It would naturally be sent to you."

Mary was silent, thinking of many things. At last she laid a hand on the old pastor's. He grasped it eagerly.

"That is all right," she said, almost under her breath. "Alice thinks so, too. But—and you must not tell this to a living soul—I don't know! Somehow in my own heart I cannot feel that he sent her. Yet it is reasonable to think as you and Alice do—and so I am acting as though I thought so too!"

"But," exclaimed the old pastor,—"don't you really *know?*"

"No, I don't!"

And then she told him all there was to tell.

When she was through, he said again positively, "But the child must be Elwood's! That is the only rational explanation of the whole thing."

"She is not in the least like him," Mary returned.

"That may be, but she is his, we may be sure."

"Have it that way, and I am glad the town has so settled it; but I could not tell them it was so, and I could not tell them anything. I thought they might as well work with a whole piece of uncharted cloth as with a few scraps. It gives them a better chance to work out something interesting." And she smiled with a touch of sarcasm again.

The old minister had asked few questions; he simply listened to Mary's story, and by tacit understanding the problem as to whether Elwood was living or not, was left untouched. There was silence, now, between them while the car skimmed on and on, and Elizabeth Lee chattered away to the chauffeur, to his evident liking, till at last Mary spoke abruptly:

"The truth is, Mr. Stillwell, strange as it may seem to you, I have for years longed

with all my heart for a child! That's a confession no old maid should make, but it is true."

"My dear, my dear," exclaimed the old doctor, moved as he rarely had been in his serene life in the fastnesses of the beautiful Berkshire hills, where life flows with unusual steadiness, even in this stirring twentieth century. For such a statement to come from Mary Halsey of all people! It showed that the frank spirit of the new age had penetrated even here where the hills hold their own in rare seclusion.

Having begun, Mary wanted to finish, with the peculiar urge out-of-character impulses at times impose. She hurried on, scarcely noticing the old man's affectionate understanding.

"I wanted a child so terribly that I did not question overmuch how this one was coming to me. I simply grabbed her, so to speak. You know, really, the need of this century is to provide a respectable way for old maids to have children," she went on,

daringly, "especially in New England where there are so many of us."

The old pastor laughed heartily, understanding perfectly, as Mary knew he would, and putting it softly away for no future repetition, as Mary also knew he would.

"Mary, Mary," he said at last, "you are a real woman, although you have tried to make us all think you were not!"

"Perhaps so, but you were all ready to dub me, 'Uncle Mary.' "

Mr. Stillwell laughed again most heartily, in fact it was a "Ha, Ha!" that even made Libbie Lee turn around and smile at them through the glass partition that separated them.

"Now, Mary," he said, as soon as he got his breath, "you know that you have bossed us all for years while you sewed up our shirts and made our dresses. You have even measured us off spiritually on the yard stick and sized us up unsparingly."

"Have I, really?" said Mary, with a pathetic sort of wonder.

"But, we have understood you, child, and loved and respected you—only you must let us have our little fun. You know New England folk can't live without a little neighborly fun, and we just settled some old scores with this 'Uncle Mary,' which the great little treasure of your life brought with her. But there is no disrespect meant in it, I assure you; the town admires the way you have kept things together here for you and Alice, when, had it not been for her, you could have gone away and found success—and perchance happiness, for you are no old maid—not even yet. That you have fine business qualities, that you are a strong, fine personality, is one reason the name fits you so well."

The old minister would never know how he soothed Mary's rebellious, hurt heart with his wise words and perfect understanding, while she, on her part, would never know how he had longed to help her through all the years, when he knew it was impossible to try!

The chauffeur had, of his own accord swung around a circle, and they were in the village once more, so Mary directed him to the parsonage and the two who had found understanding, parted with only a hand-clasp which said all they wanted to say.

CHAPTER XIII

INVESTIGATION

It was just about this time, perhaps a few days before Mary's talk with Mr. Stillwell, that a stranger appeared at the hotel at Barringer. He was well dressed, of medium height and good proportions, dark brown hair, serious eyes and determined jaw, which gave a distinct impression of remoteness until suddenly the eyes lit up with a flash, which threw him into a new world of interest, sympathy, alertness, humor. He sat idly in the lobby reading a morning paper; but an observer might have noticed that he glanced up at each entering footstep; and that, later, when a somewhat seedy looking man with a slouch in his gait which proclaimed him the hotel lounger, came into the room, the stranger's eyes flashed just a little with sudden interest, which was quickly subdued while he read on, unconcerned, for per-

haps an hour. He rose at last and moved about the lobby, consulting his watch frequently, as though he might be expecting some one who was a bit late. He finally paused at a front window for a look outside, and it so happened that it was the window near which the seedy individual had seated himself. The stranger glanced toward him and was met by the full gaze of the other man's empty, dreaming orbs. A glance of recognition passed between them; the stranger nodded, and the lounger smiled slowly:

"You was here last fall sometime, wasn't you?"

"Why, yes, I was—and now, I remember, you told me about Sunfield folks, did you not?" and the stranger's smile was quietly inviting.

"Yes," drawled the other, "and p'rhaps you remember I told you about the Halsey Girls. Things have been happening to them since then. If you've got time I'll tell you about 'em."

The stranger looked somewhat reluctantly about for a chair, and finally drew one up, at the same time consulting his watch and remarking, "I have a few minutes."

"Well, the Halsey girls, 'specially Mary, has been a reg'lar movie show, so Sophie Stoneham says, for the hull town. First a little girl, all dressed up like one o' them Fifth Avenue New York kids, dropped down on the girls—nobody knows from where, but everybody thinks it's their brother's child, so that is all right. Their brother Elwood run away years ago and never has been heard from. Then one o' them big limousines, with a smart chauffeur, dropped down out the sky, too, and the way Mary swells around in that thing, certainly must call attention of her Pa and Ma in them upper regions. Then the way she dresses scandalizes the town."

The stranger smiled slowly, as he said: "The town thinks there is something wrong?" with a quiet rising inflection.

"No, not exactly. I told Sophie Stone-

ham when I met her on the street here a few days ago, that they was all jealous because they didn't have finery and limousines and chauffeurs too." The narrator paused here for enjoyment of his own penetration. Then he went on: "But Mary's been too straight all her life for folks to get up much dirty gossip now, 'specially since there ain't been no man seen around—and the town's had their eyes open, too. Old Mr. Stillwell, the pastor at Sunfield long before Mary was born, wouldn't stand for no gossip 'bout her noway. The trouble is, them Halseys have been too close-mouthed ever since Elwood run away; so Mary won't tell nobody nothing. But the town thinks Elwood sends her the money, or else he's dead and left it—Well, I swun! There she is now in her limousine, just stopping at that store next door! See her—she's getting out—with all them yaller plumes bobbing about on her head!"

And the stranger glanced out, with no great display of interest, as a lady, well

dressed, and tastefully, in spite of the "yaller plumes," stepped from her car and turned her face directly toward them as she did so. An instant showed a face of good contour and features, but the expression was not winning. The next moment she had bent toward the little girl whom the chauffeur had helped out, and taking the child's hand, disappeared in the store.

"Well, changes come to everybody, whether they are in a village or a city," said the stranger; and then he looked at his watch again, murmuring, "I must be off," and stepped briskly over to the clerk, gathered up his hand baggage and disappeared.

As he went out he said to himself: "Not yet, not yet."

CHAPTER XIV

"STAN' STILL!"

THE next Sunday after Miranda Evans had said she would teach the children no more, Mary had gone with Elizabeth Lee to church and Sunday school as usual, and when they walked into the primary room sure enough, no Miranda Evans was in the teacher's place. And the little group of scholars were wide-eyed and inquiring.

"Where do you think Miranda can be?" was whispered back and forth. Everybody waited full ten minutes—wasted minutes, for Miranda Evans had meant what she said the Sunday before, and she never entered the room again. The problem of "why" was an unexplained mystery, for who would dare undertake to penetrate the workings of a New England spinster's mind of the last generation? Faithful, untiring, conse-

crated, repressed, she took what came to her —made decisions, forebore explanations, and went on the even tenor of her way with the gray finality of her granite hills. Miranda came no more, and that was all there was to it.

Mary Halsey again was prepared on the lesson, and again taught the children. But it was going to be about as drab an affair as Miranda's weekly lesson, she scornfully said to herself, as she took her place before them. But her interest quickened at once in the process of trying to make twenty youngsters, of varying ages and both sexes, listen while she talked. Miranda had always been content if she had kept the boys from throwing wads of paper, or sticking pins into one another. But, listening to Miranda's dull attempts, and disgust with her own best efforts, made Mary feel that there must be a better way of doing it than Sunfield had yet found. So, when Mr. Stillwell, during the next week, put before her the finality of Miranda's resignation

and his keen desire that Mary become the regular primary teacher, the thing most unexpectedly appealed to her. Would it not be another avenue to Elizabeth Lee's heart?

The making more of the lesson between them, and then the challenge of teaching the class, with the little girl in it, made powerful appeal to her.

So, she had gone on doing the best she could for a few weeks. Then came the talk with Mr. Stillwell, and it was not many days after that her limousine drew up in front of the parsonage, the chauffeur dismounted, helped her and Elizabeth Lee out, and the two went into the parsonage.

It had been fully ten years since Mary Halsey was there. No wonder dear Mrs. Stillwell's black lace head-dress fluttered on her round, bare crown, and that the white silken fringe of hair which was gathered into a soft knot at the back, almost broke from its moorings as she tore her reading glasses from their place and strained her

neck to see Mary alight and come up the path.

"Father!" the old lady cried, as she wildly reached for his knee, "there's Mary Halsey and her limousine!"

The little wasted figure of a boy about seven on the couch beneath the window was electrified at this unusual demonstration, and the thin face under a thick crown of brown hair, was up at the window in a twinkling to look out.

"Oh, Grand," he cried in turn, "see the little girl! She's just about my size!" And then he had to drop back, for the small sharp elbow had no staying power.

But Mr. Stillwell had been roused by the old lady's cry with quite as much vigor as had moved the little boy, and he was at the door by the time Mary's knock sounded.

"Why, Mary, Mary, come in, come in! And Miss Elizabeth Lee, too, come right into the sitting room," said he, while Mrs. Stillwell's knotted hands had quickly smoothed down her excited locks so that she

was at the sitting room door with outstretched hand and tender, smiling welcome.

Mary blushed under it all, for she knew she did not deserve it—and she would have liked to say so, but the words would not come,—and then she saw Elizabeth Lee walking straight up to the wasted figure of the little boy lying on the couch just under the window. The three older people instinctively stopped to watch them.

The two smiled at each other first; Elizabeth Lee's a sunny, comradely little smile, and the boy's just a wee ghost with sudden yearning for life.

"You're sick," said Elizabeth Lee.

"Yes," returned the little boy.

Then Elizabeth Lee put her two pudgy little arms around him and kissed him!

The three on-lookers found their eyes full of sudden tears.

"I'll do things for you," went on Elizabeth Lee, "I'll just love to! That's the way we did at the 'Home.' When anybody was sick, somebody always did things for them,

and I want to do things for you. May I, Uncle Mary?" she turned quickly and asked.

"Of course," said Mary, with constraint, for it came to her that she had heard some months before that this little grandson had been left with the old pastor and his wife; that he was a victim of the dreadful African fever; that his father, who was a missionary to Africa, had brought him to America, hoping he would soon recuperate. But he had not; and so, had been left in the old grandparents' care while the father returned to his family and work, with the doctor's assurance that time would restore the boy. Here he had been, a little helpless invalid ever since, and she had never taken enough interest to inquire about him! Now, as she looked at him, she saw the brown eyes of Jimmy Stillwell set in the little fellow's face; and, instantly, Jimmy and Elwood were racing about the old brown cottage!

But these eyes weren't merry, mischievous ones like Jimmy's! They were dull, pa-

thetic, listless, matching the pallor of the small face, and—Oh, if they should close and the little thin legs straighten, it would be Jimmy Stillwell lying dead before her!

What was the matter with her? Was she going to collapse over an imagination? She straightened quickly, as she took a seat at Mrs. Stillwell's cordial invitation, and the old people drew chairs close to hers, but the children continued to hold their attention. Elizabeth Lee, standing close, was patting the little boy's arm; and he looked pleased, though he usually scorned petting. Somehow, with a boy's mother away in Africa, even if a boy was sick—or perhaps all the more so because he was—it wasn't easy to take petting from anybody else! And grandfather and grandmother had understood. But the brown eyes were smiling back into the little girl's round face, now, and when she said, "What is your name?" he replied with a real laugh, "Stan' Still."

Elizabeth Lee laughed too, and said, "But you do not stand a bit, do you?"

"Not now," he still smiled back; "but I'm going to." And there was a little ring to his voice. "What is your name?" he asked her.

Elizabeth Lee looked furtively around at Uncle Mary, then turned back and whispered, "Libbie Lee Starling, and sometimes it's Libbie Love!"

The older folks did not catch what she said, and Grandmother Stillwell instantly felt they must not eavesdrop any more, so began conversation with Mary; and Mary, taking up the purpose of her visit with characteristic definiteness, told the old minister of her feeling that there were modern ways of teaching children, about which she knew nothing, and that she was anxious to study, investigate, do anything necessary to prepare herself for the task she had undertaken. The old minister beamed within, but he only met Mary's proposition with quick interest, told her of some books to

order and suggested that she visit the Sunday Schools of their nearest large towns for ideas.

Mary said that was in line with what she was thinking, and that she would also visit the kindergarten in Barringer—perhaps some other places as well, and "just see how they handle children now."

"From what I have heard," she said, "which I admit has not been much, they don't expect them to sit still on benches like sticks for an hour or two at a time,—punish them if they laugh, or shake the life out of them if they fall asleep!"

"You're right, Mary, modern folks won't have *some* sins to answer for, that we old ones may have to get pretty hot over one of these days," he smiled ruefully.

Just then Elizabeth Lee left the little boy and ran to Mary's knee, "Oh, Uncle Mary, can't I take Stan' Still to ride?"

The older folks laughed at her literal acceptance of the little boy's name, and he laughed himself, saying slowly, "Libbie Lee,

that is just what mother used to call me, because I never would stand still a minute —though that was a long time ago. My name's Stanley Stillwell," he added, emphasizing the "ley."

Upon which Elizabeth Lee ran back to him in delight: "Oh, you've got Lee in your name just like I have!" And she ever afterward persisted in calling him, "Stan-Lee," with the emphasis on the last syllable. "But, Uncle Mary," she turned again to Mary, "can't I take him to ride?"

"Certainly," replied Mary, embarrassed that she could have had the car so long—and never thought of any little sufferer whom she might take—worse than that, had hardened her heart to the one before her eyes all the time—her sister, Alice. It looked wicked beyond belief to her, at this moment!

Grandmother Stillwell was at the little boy's side in an instant, all solicitude; "Do you think you feel able to go, dearie?"

"Yes, Grander," he said, determinedly. Grandfather was "Grand" to him, and

grandmother, "Grander"; so Grand coming up quickly, too, agreed with an urgent, "Let him go mother; it will do him good. He needn't go far, you know."

"I will look after him carefully," said Mary earnestly, and all in a twinkling, the little fellow was warmly bundled up, then Stafford, the strong young chauffeur, carried him out in his arms and laid him across the luxuriously cushioned back seat, while Mary and Elizabeth Lee sat in the two front adjustable seats, though the little girl was oftener on the floor of the car, showing "Stan-Lee" things, or just sitting up close to him and looking at him in the freedom of childhood. Once she pulled out a tiny curl of her hair and leaned over, stretching it to his brown head.

"Your hair is just like mine," she cried happily, "and your eyes, too," she went on, with a note of triumph at the end. And his lusterless brown eyes resurrected a real twinkle, as he replied:

"Only yours are heaps the prettiest!"

Libbie Lee was truly a little mother, born; but, beside this, having left a "Home" full of children, she was also hungry for the intimate touch of her kind, and so was the little boy for that matter. The old people had not thought of trying to have children with him; they were just waiting for him to get strong enough for that, never realizing that strong children help more than grown people can to give courage and love of life to their weaker little fellows.

It was a ride not to be described; too full of happiness for the children, and too full of tender budding things for Mary—things such as yearning over helplessness; old memories tugging at her heart; strong love for children that was a new, more unselfish thing, perhaps, than she had known. The little boy had crept into her heart beside the little girl, and she was instantly aware that she was going to do everything she could for him with no thought of returns. Perchance in time she would even learn to be less selfish with Elizabeth Lee!

CHAPTER XV

FINDING NEW PATHS

WHAT a way the days sometimes have of taking wings! And carrying one into new, glad things, as well! It is just as though one had turned from a tortuous lane of struggle and uncertainty into a highway, with green shrubs and blossoming trees on either side, all racing gayly with you. It was thus that things went for Mary during the early spring months. Indeed, nature, herself, had taken just such an overnight turn, in a way that only New England knows. The struggle of the winter lingers wearily with clouds and chill and sullen ice. Then, lo! A morning comes, almost unheralded, when the apple blossoms are smiling from every orchard and wayside lane; when birds are singing and busy with their nests, and when golden sunshine kisses every

spear of grass and each blossoming, singing thing! Mary made the turn with nature that spring, and the beautiful dark blue limousine often went gliding here and there through the blossoming, budding fields with an equally gay entourage. Every day after that first visit to the parsonage and the finding of limp, listless little "Stan' Still," her car had been at the door; and it was only a few times that the boy was taken from his couch under the window, coverings and all, and carried out to lie on that luxurious rear seat, with Elizabeth Lee "doing things" for him. Then, he was suddenly attired in a dark blue sailor suit, with a rough-and-ready warm overcoat buttoned beneath his chin; and, instead of lying down when Stafford had carried him out, he sat upright on the big seat and Elizabeth Lee beside him. A gay little pair they were; Mary had to admonish them, again and again, lest the little boy get too tired.

"Why, Uncle Mary, this is nothing! You should just have seen me in Africa—

'specially when we first went there. The way I did get after those lizards that were all over our house! They found out what an American boy was," he ended with a little nervous boy-brag.

Mary smiled at him, but Elizabeth Lee said wonderingly, "What's lizards?"

"You know what a snake is, don't you?" The little girl nodded fearsomely, and the boy went on, "They're snakes, almost, only they're not so long and have got legs on their sides. Some of them are little teeny grayish-white things that crawl all over the ceilings at night—and they scared sister nearly to death at first. Then there are great big, kind o' red fellows that are enough to scare anybody when you first see them. Father wasn't with us when we went into the house, and when mother and sister were so scared with the ugly things everywhere, I just went after them, I tell you! But father came in pretty soon and said nobody need be afraid of them, for they wouldn't hurt anybody, and that people over there

wanted them, tried to keep them, so that they could eat up the flies and insects that were bad."

Mary exclaimed at this; "You don't tell me your father and mother have to live with their house full of lizards all the time!"

"Oh, that's nothing," Stanley returned, with full-fledged boy-scorn. "How'd you like to live in a city of ninety thousand black people, with ugly black bodies that you see almost all of—and you the only white folks in the town—just your father and your mother and you and your sister?"

"Now, Stanley, you mustn't tell us any more dark things this nice spring morning," said Mary decidedly, while inwardly she thought, "Have I ever made any sacrifices in my life? Think of little old Jimmy Stillwell giving up every comfort this country had to offer, and going to such a place to live—simply with the doubtful hope of helping a few out of those thousands of ugly blacks to find God! And how he and Elwood had—"

But, with her admonition, they all came back to the lovely spring day which had suddenly been dropped down by nature's hand, marking a new era of life and growth, and including Stanley and Elizabeth Lee in the things of change. For she was to be no longer the little brooding mother, just revelling in doing things for him. He was a real boy from that morning, telling her wonderful tales of that strange country where he had lived for one year—and, yes, letting her know in nice, but clear-cut boy-ways that he was the leader and chief of their small tribe of two!

From that morning strength came with a rush to Stanley; and, upon the very next ride, Mary had Sam Oldham to help the chauffeur, and Alice was easily transferred from her wheel chair to the big limousine!

When Mary announced that she was to go —that was still Mary's way—Alice had protested firmly that she did not believe she could go; and when Mary persisted, she cried almost in a whisper, "But, Mary,—

you don't know! I haven't been outside in so long—I am afraid, I am, really, afraid, Mary!" And her usually quiet lips trembled as she added, "It may hurt, you know."

Libbie Lee had danced on ahead, overjoyed that Auntie Alice was going, and Mary, looking about to see that they were alone, put tender arms around her sister and said, "But you will not be afraid when we really get started! It is just as soft as a bed—only more so," urged Mary, "and if it hurts you the least bit, we will come straight back."

It was not the words, for Alice did not hear them, but the marvelous manner of Mary that made Alice yield, with fear all gone, and assurance striding into its place. And when Alice leaned back against the pillows that had been piled up behind her on the soft cushioned seat, Libbie Lee clapped her hands and cried, "Now, you will always go, won't you, Auntie Alice?" her little face beaming.

This made Mary wince a bit, but she had started unconsciously on the broad highway of unselfishness and it still beckoned her on. So the apple trees blossomed with promise of fruit, as they drove out toward Barringer to try the motion of the car for Alice with no one looking on. But, after a mile of careful driving, she declared the motion did not hurt her the least bit, and with joy and spring in her gentle eyes once more, Mary could not resist Libbie Lee's plea that they go by and let Stanley see Auntie Alice riding in the car.

"I would so love to see the old street again, and the houses and the church and everything," cried Alice tremulously, as they turned back toward the village. It was like a resurrection to her.

So they drove slowly through the street, and finally stopped at the parsonage when Grand and Grander Stillwell came hurrying out to the gate, Grander's head-dress and snowy fringe fluttering in the spring breeze under her excitement, and Grand forgetting

there ever was such a thing as rheumatism, while Stanley just walked out on his own two, quite firm legs, without leave or license.

It was a real jollification they all had, and Libbie Lee begged so, and Stanley looked so fit and fine after his walk, that Stafford went back for his light overcoat on the hall rack, and he was tucked in beside Auntie Alice for just a wee ride more.

"I see there's going to be no chance for me any more," said the old minister with mock plaintiveness, and then nothing would do for anybody, from Mary down to Libbie Lee, but that Grander should put on her bonnet and shawl and sit on one of the adjustible seats beside Mary, while Grand went for his hat and coat and sat with the chauffeur.

So it was the gayest sort of a party that went down the spring highway for a mile, and then drove back, lest Alice get too tired, dropped the Stillwells, including Stanley, at their house, and made its way back to the

little brown cottage where Sam Oldham waited to help Alice back to the wheel chair once more.

"I certainly am Cinderella and have been carried off by the fairy godmother of a limousine," she cried, "for it does not seem possible that I have really been out and seen the town once more!"

Libbie Lee hung happily over her; "But you did go, Auntie Alice; so you see folks don't have to have good feet or backs, or good heads, if they have nice lim'sines. You and Stanley can both go, now, all the time," she persisted again.

And Mary winced again. But, of course it was not possible for Alice to go all the time, and Mary's new, broad highway included many blossoming ways. She must go to Sunday Schools in neighboring larger towns; she must go to kindergarten schools within reach and observe modern methods with children. So, while she did not forget Alice and Grand and Grander, including them often in short rides—and often, again,

making up parties of children to go—the car and the chauffeur were kept busy mainly with these business trips, as Mary called them. But Elizabeth Lee and Stanley always went, for his strength was rapidly equal to it, and the visits to schools where children were taught in such an attractive way as modern methods present, gave them constant delight and taught them the things they should be learning in just the way that was best for the time.

But not only did these two especially favored little ones begin to reap benefit and gather delight, but the little folk of the town very soon entered into what seemed almost a fairy land to them.

Secret things were going on for the whole of one week, with nobody knowing except Mary's helpers and her two children, as she had come to call them in her heart, with, of course, Auntie Alice. Then late Saturday afternoon when everything was all finished, came the exhibition. Mary, with Elizabeth Lee, full of excitement, drove up

to the parsonage for Grand and Grander and Stanley. They came out to the car beaming. Stanley because he knew the secret was to come out; and the two old people because it delighted them to see that car and the new Mary with her dear little charge, come to their door.

"Everybody is to get in," cried Mary, and Elizabeth Lee scrambled out the car door in her eagerness to make sure they were going to come.

"Yes, Grander, do come," she tugged at the old lady's dress and pleaded—as if any pleading were going to be necessary!

Stopping only long enough to kiss her, Mrs. Stillwell hurried in for her bonnet, while Stanley met her coming out, tugging at his light coat, as he ran, and bringing Grand's hat on top of his own snug cap, which had lit cross-wise on his round head.

"Look at Stanley, how funny he looks," cried Libbie Lee, and amid the boy's antics they all got in with a laughing scramble, for

happy secrets are sure to get into the air before they're told and stir things up. Grander said she thought her hat was about as tipsy as Stanley's cap, she had put it on in such a hurry, and the old minister protested that he was being kidnapped!

"Between my good wife, who has always had her own way with me, and this Uncle Mary" (he loved to call her so, while she was getting to like the lurking fun in it) "and these two little dominating rascals, I am getting so I dare not call my soul my own!" And he gave Stanley, the last one to get in the machine, a mischievous push, then climbed in beside the chauffeur who was in smiling accord with his passengers.

What chauffeur could retain his city mask under the influence of spring in these smiling hills?

When they drove up and stopped at the church door, the minister and his wife began to realize that some plot was, indeed, on hand. Mary had the church key, for Sam Oldham was sexton, with the key hers

at will, and they all walked through the quiet old meeting house with a quick sense of awe—except Stanley who couldn't refrain from pulling at Libbie Lee's curls just to keep his spirit within bounds.

Mary was leading and the small procession went quickly up the aisle to the little room in the rear. Here Mary paused an instant till all came up, then threw open the door and cried with a flourish, "Behold!" Her cheeks were pink and her eyes sparkling like a young girl's.

Before the old pastor and his wife was a complete transformation. The plain, even dreary room where children had gathered for generations at the church, had been made a thing of beauty. The walls were a heavenly blue, with a kindergarten base, of flying birds and all the animals that went into the ark! There were pictures on the walls—beautiful copies of Biblical pictures by the great masters, pretty curtains were at the windows; the floor was stained and a soft rug put down in the center; then a

long, big table held chief place with cunning little red chairs all around it.

The old people were speechless for a moment, then the long-serving pastor murmured, "I am almost ready to say, 'Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart'—"

"No, no," cried Mary, "we never want anybody but you!"

"Mary," he said, "you do not know, child, how I have longed that we might keep pace with the times in the Lord's work here. But we have so little money, and I am too old, and too rheumatic!"

He paused for a moment, his eyes and Mary's both suspiciously bright, as though tears might be just on the threshold, then he added smiling, "But I'm going to perk up, Mary! I've just got to live up to these new-fangled things!"

The children had Grander by either hand and were showing her everything while Mr. Stillwell and Mary had stopped to talk.

"How did you do it without the town's

finding out?" he asked quizzically, at last.

"You may ask that," returned Mary heartily; "but you know I took some lessons in stealthiness when Elizabeth Lee came. I had her a whole twenty-four hours without anybody's finding it out—not even the milk boy!"

"You don't mean it, Mary!" he cried, shaking with laughter. "But how did you accomplished this—a whole week's *coup d'etat?*"

Mary laughed happily with him. "Why, I bought everything in Barringer and had it sent to the house. Then Sam Oldham, Stafford and myself carried things to the church after ten at night and worked there till twelve. Of course we put up the shades at the windows the first thing, and being at the back, with our one window at the side hidden by that nice big maple, just in full leaf for the purpose, there was little chance of being seen. The only thing I did openly and above board, was the cleaning of the

walls and the floor, then calsomining the walls. People saw the workmen going in for that, but it did not enlist much interest. I have heard that Sophie Stoneham said she thought I might do that much if I was going to impose on the children by trying to teach them, when all I knew how to do was to sew and scold!"

Mary's mouth set a little at this, but one glance around the room and she was smiling again. "You see it did not take long to put the things in place and Sam Oldham, who goes and comes here without anybody making comment, stained and varnished the floor for me. Everything was ready, you see, by Friday, and we set things in place last night, and hung the pictures."

"But the whole street is wondering by this time what we are all doing here," Mary added laughingly, "and I think we had better not linger."

So she gathered up her little party, and was none too soon about it, for Sophie

Stoneham met them at the door, somewhat out of breath.

"Well," she wheezed, "have you been having services all to yourselves? Some folks are getting to be mighty exclusive, it seems."

They were all guilty, of course, but Mr. Stillwell met her with pretty good grace, considering.

"So it does, Sophie. Mary had some cleaning done in the children's room and we came to see that everything was all right for to-morrow. I'm going to walk along with you, Sophie," he added; "there's something I want you to do for me," and he smiled his "wheedling smile," as he called it to his wife, when they laughed together over things, sometimes—which they had found was the only way to keep ministerial courage up when humanity proved too much for them.

"You know if a fellow could just stop untangling human threads for a while, and sell soap and starch, or anything that can't snap and bite, or weep, why a minister could

get along better," was what he told his wife many a time.

By this we know that the vacation idea had not penetrated Sunfield. At any rate, if it had, the old minister had not become modernized enough to take advantage of it.

But he knew well how to use that "wheedling smile," and Sophie Stoneham was disconcerted when it was turned upon her and the minister proposed to "walk along with her." In fact she had no objective except the church, to see what Mary and "that child" and the minister's folks were doing there out of hours. But she turned her heavy weight about, and walked along with Mr. Stillwell while she listened to a plea for help which proved to be quite in her line. He wanted her to go to see Miranda Evans, tell her Mary had cleaned up a little in the Sunday School room of the children, and ask her if she wouldn't come to Sunday School next day.

The minister knew Miranda would not come, but he thought it would be a safe

place for Sophie to do her speculating as to what they had gone to the church for!

Well, ministers have to be a little crafty sometimes, dealing with humanity seven days in a week!

The delight of the minister and his wife, of Stanley and Libbie Lee over the pretty room with its up-to-date Sunday School equipment, was as nothing compared to that of the children when they gathered there next day. Some stopped spell-bound at the door, others ran here and there exclaiming over everything; but all, in the end, gathered about Mary, some clinging to her and crying, "You are the dearest Uncle Mary in the world, to fix this all up for us so beautifully!" and the rest echoing it in their shining eyes. As for Mary, herself, she never looked happier or prettier, even in her early girlhood than she did that day!

There was really no time for a lesson. The hour was entirely filled looking at the things and finding out what they were for. Stanley helped greatly in this,—in fact he

appeared very much as if he were the author and the finisher of the whole thing! Libbie Lee followed delightedly around after him, saying, "Yes," and "See this," as often as she could get a word in. But at last Mary rounded them all up, seated them in the little chairs and asked what they wanted to sing.

One bright-eyed, old-fashioned little girl cried, "Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow."

Mary laughed within, for nothing could have better shown how far behind the times they were, but at the same time nothing could ever better express reverential praise from human lips, and the sound of little voices in the solemn old hymn, while her own heart welled with praise and thanksgiving, made her suddenly an almost teary Uncle Mary.

CHAPTER XVI

A STRANGE RETURN

It was one morning in May that Mary was carrying out a promise to Stanley and Elizabeth Lee to go into the woods a little and get some mountain laurel, which was just at the height of its spring bloom and beauty. It was a suddenly hot morning, when the sun seemed really bent on burning everything up that came beneath its rays—in a fashion that belongs to the very energetic ways of a New England spring.

The car was at the door, and Elizabeth Lee, a "really" little summer girl with low socks and slippers, pink gingham and broad-brimmed hat, was already on the pavement throwing kisses back at Auntie Alice, who had decided she would rather stay in the

cool house than ride anywhere. Mary came from the house (herself a picture of pretty summer comfort), the car whirred off and they were soon waiting for Stanley at the parsonage door.

Almost instantly he came bounding out, too—and what was the funny thing he had on his head?

Elizabeth Lee laughed aloud, as soon as she saw him, and Mary joined her as she asked,

"What *is* that thing you have on your head, Stanley Stillwell?"

"That's my African helmet. This sun this morning makes me think of Africa, and I just wore my helmet. You see you can't go out, even in the early morning there, without a helmet; and a little later, when the sun drops, hot as an oven, right down on your head, you can't go at all."

"I wouldn't stay in such a bad place as that," said Elizabeth Lee decidedly.

Stanley was quick to respond to this: "Humph! I guess if you were as splendid

a man as my father, and doing as much good as he is, you would stay there all right!"

Which made Elizabeth Lee very meek indeed. She didn't understand, of course, but she was aware that her chief was "calling her down," which is always enough for womankind.

Mary laughed at the two, behind her handkerchief, then her thought shot back to little Jimmie Stillwell—and Elwood. They had always been together. What sacrifices Jimmie was making, and Elwood—Why did remembrance of Elwood so constantly pursue her, was the impatient protest.

But Elizabeth Lee was laughing again at Stanley and his funny hat—and then in a twinkling her broad hat was off and Stanley had put his big, awkward thing on her own curly head.

"O-o-o," the little girl giggled and wriggled, "it smothers me!"

So it was off again in a twinkling, while Stanley put it back on his own head, saying,

"I wouldn't let you have it, anyway. But I tell you, you will want it when you get out in the sun hunting laurel!"

"I suspect she will, Stanley," smiled Mary. "It *is* hot, and I think I am going to drive to a spot which is close to the road, where I know there is a lot of laurel, and let you two go and get it for yourselves while I study my books."

She spoke to the chauffeur, telling him to go through a little cross-road that ran back of their own place. There was nice shade there, she remembered, where they could park the machine and be in sight of the children all the while.

So, out the two tumbled when the machine halted, and Mary told them just where to go. Then she smilingly watched the bobbing odd tan helmet with its cool green lining, which set out from the boy's head, making him amusingly top-heavy. But it really was very light and he plunged here and there easily, with Libbie Lee trudging breathlessly after, till Mary called out to them:

"Not so fast, Stanley. Elizabeth Lee cannot keep up."

She thought once of sending the chauffeur after them, just to keep watch, but she had promised they might gather the laurel all by themselves; so, as no harm could come to them, close at hand as they were, she settled back to her reading while the chauffeur did the same. He liked a book and always had one in his pocket.

Perhaps half or three-quarters of an hour had passed and in her reading Mary constantly caught the children's voices, as she thought, but there came a sudden realization that she was not hearing them—had not been for a vague length of time that made her instantly anxious.

She spoke hurriedly to the chauffeur; "I think I will go down and see about the children." He replied promptly; "Would you not like me to go?" as he sprang from his seat to open the door.

"No," said Mary, who was already stepping out, "I think I will like to go, myself."

So she forgot the sun in the little flutter of anxiety that had come to her, and walked briskly down the slope to where tall maples, canopied and moss-covered bowlders and mountain laurel were intertwined. Her ear keenly reached out as she went, for sound of the children's trebles, but nothing came back to her, and her anxiety grew as she came upon a pile of gathered laurel; then suddenly the low voice of a man sounded from beyond a big bowlder in front of her and Libbie Lee's childish laugh broke over the stillness. A tense moment, and she rounded the bowlder to see a man with dark hat drawn over his eyes, seated upon a fallen tree trunk, and the two children standing beside him watching intently while he whittled something into shape.

The man looked quickly up and the two children turned startled faces at Mary's rapid step and advancing figure.

"Stanley—Elizabeth Lee, what do you mean by staying so long and coming so far?" she cried, catching each of the chil-

dren by the hand and hardly giving a glance to the man.

"Why,—Uncle Mary, he is making us a whistle—please let us stay till it's done," cried Stanley, pulling back in unconscious protest, for they had really neither gone far nor stayed long.

Mary turned toward the man involuntarily, taking in with one sweeping gaze the frail figure, pallid face, and emaciated fingers. Her hands dropped as though struck from their grasp.

"Elwood!"

The word came almost inaudibly, at last, as the man met her startled gaze with quiet, steady eyes.

For a full minute the tenseness had held even the children. Then Mary recovered herself with supreme effort.

"Stanley," she said with quick authority, "you take Elizabeth Lee around beyond this bowlder to where you have piled your laurel, and wait there till I come."

When the children were gone Mary

turned quickly again and exclaimed: "Elwood, you are sick!"

A slow, whimsical smile came to the pallid face and he said, "No, Mary, I am almost well!"

Tears rushed to Mary's eyes, but she beat them back as she said brokenly: "Come home with me." And the anger of years fled from her heart!

His smile had faded but there was warmth in the somber eyes which met hers.

"I have not come here to bother you," the brother said; "I only wanted to have another look—at things."

"But you must come home," Mary cried, laying a hand on his arm.

"No, Mary, I think not." Then the whimsical smile came again and he began to whittle once more: "You do not want me, Mary."

"But I do!" cried Mary again. "And, Elwood—Alice—Alice is a cripple—she will want to see you!"

"'BUT YOU MUST COME HOME,' MARY CRIED, LAYING A HAND ON HIS ARM"

His hands paused and his eyes questioned with instant pain: "How—when?"

"Just after you left," said Mary, hurrying over the words: "She fell from the step-ladder—and she would give anything to see you."

Elwood looked at her keenly: "And you have had to do everything?"

"Oh—no, Alice has helped me," she replied quickly.

His eyes did not leave her face and he guessed, quite accurately, how much Alice had been able to help.

"Will you not come to see her, Elwood?" pleaded Mary again.

He whittled once more, and with a few touches the whistle was done. At last he spoke: "Do not think I do not want to come," he said, weakening the bonds which for years had held him. "But I must not stay," he ended at last firmly.

Mary knew as well as though he had added the words that he was not willing to stay, and make them—her—trouble.

"We will go then," she said, and he rose with determined vigor, so she did not take his arm to steady him, as she longed to do.

They went around the bowlder, and not far beyond were the children seated on the ground beside the heap of flowering laurel, waiting in a sort of awed expectancy.

"Come, Stanley and Elizabeth Lee," said Mary quickly, "you two walk on ahead. I will send Stafford back to get the laurel."

Both children looked much disappointed, because they had expected to have the fun of lugging the laurel in themselves.

Elwood read their disappointment, but Mary was too preoccupied to notice. He smiled at them and said: "Here is your whistle. Blow at this end, boy."

And the two ran ahead, the gay little pink gingham and the odd African helmet, with joy's equilibrium fully restored, and Elizabeth Lee having, of course, to find most of her delight in listening to Stanley's whistles.

Mary kept her thought upon Elwood, ex-

pecting uncertain steps, but he determinedly mounted the short, steep slope and in a moment they were upon the road with the car before them. The change in Mary's life rushed back into her consciousness, but she simply said: "Our car is waiting; we can soon get out of this heat."

She did not see the quick questioning look that came into Elwood's eyes, but he made no remark, accepting a seat in the elegant limousine at last without the least change of expression.

"Stafford, this is my brother, Mr. Halsey," Mary said, as the chaffeur stepped down to open the door. Both men bowed, and without pause she went on: "Stanley, you and Elizabeth Lee can both sit with Stafford this time," and motioned to Elwood to sit in the back with her.

Not a word passed between them on the brief ride, while Stanley and Libbie Lee delighted themselves in whistling for the chaffeur's benefit. As they paused at the door of the brown cottage, Mary laid a

hand on Elwood's arm and said: "I must speak to Alice first. Wait where you are, children," she called, hurrying in the house. The news was soon made known to Alice, and then, in upon the gentler sister's tide of joy, Mary broke with—"But—Alice, he is ill! Don't say a word, though," and her voice struggled for steadiness again. "I will go and bring him in."

At the car, once more she directed: "Stafford, take Elizabeth Lee over to Mr. Stillwell's with Stanley, let her stay half an hour, and then bring her back here."

CHAPTER XVII

ELWOOD

THE meeting between Alice and Elwood had all the reserve which belongs to New England granite hills in general and the Halsey family in particular, though the eyes of both sister and brother told their story of deep emotion; joy coming out in the high lights and pain hiding in the dark depths. Not a word was spoken while their lips and arms clung for a brief moment. Mary fled to the kitchen the instant she had brought them together, and with trembling lips and swimming eyes flew here and there about the task of getting dinner. "Elwood must have something to eat at once," was the practical thought which steadied her more and more with each passing minute; and by the time she heard Libbie Lee's running step at the

door, she had just finished placing the simple meal upon the table.

Elwood turned toward the little girl when she appeared, her sparkling face just above a big armful of pink blossoms and green leaves. But her eyes were upon Alice, and running forward she threw the riotous laurel in that capacious lap—with it almost depositing herself.

"I got it for you," she cried; "isn't it so pretty!"

Elwood's eyes kindled as she stood close to him in her lovely childish abandon.

"Your hat, Elizabeth Lee," said Mary promptly.

"Oh, I forgot," replied the child, pulling off the hat and hanging it on her own low hook.

Alice had been smiling her thanks for the laurel offering, but somehow she could not trust herself to speak, and Mary put in again: "Alice cannot eat her dinner with all that pile of laurel in her lap," with a sort of brusque pleasantry. "Here, Eliza-

beth Lee, help me and we will carry it out to the kitchen and just pile it in the sink till it gets a good wetting."

And the two went out carrying the pink beauties, with much gayety on the child's part, and dexterous handling on Mary's as she put it in the sink with a flowing faucet.

With the little girl's chatter as emotional foil or refuge, the three whose hearts were so full effected a commonplace meal in the outward things. But Elwood ate little, while he scarcely took his eyes from the child. Sometimes they kindled with quick warmth and spontaneous affection; then they brooded or questioned with somber intensity. The two women interpreted with uncertain gropings.

When they left the table, Elwood took the child by the hand and drew her to his knee, asking how she liked the whistle.

As Mary cleared the table, she said softly to Alice, "Stay right here; I don't need any help."

But Alice turned pleading eyes toward

her, with—"I want to help!" And Mary gave no denial.

They closed the door as they went together into the kitchen, and Alice exclaimed in the next breath: "What does it mean, Mary?"

"I don't know. Has he told you anything, or asked a question?"

"No," returned Alice, "not one—only about father's death—quietly, and I told him."

"He has scarcely had a chance to talk to me," said Mary. Then she told Alice all the details of the meeting. "I remember now," she added, "that Elizabeth Lee had her hand on his knee when I found them—that burned itself into my consciousness, for it was a strange man, as I thought—not really seeing him at all in my nervous anxiety to get the children away to safety."

"He has come to have a last look at her," said Alice, suddenly sobbing, "for he can't live long, Mary."

Mary could not answer for several minutes, then she said with instinctive

honesty, "I think he wanted to see us, too. And we must simply wait his time to know more. You know Elwood."

"Yes," returned Alice staunchly, "and a finer spirit never lived!"

Mary said nothing, but loyalty was not entirely lacking in her own heart.

Meantime Elwood talked with the little girl and held her undivided interest. She leaned against his knee, and several times he made a motion to lift her to his lap, but gently put an arm about her instead. Once he held a curl and looked at it intently as he told a wonderful story about a rabbit.

Then Mary came back, and Alice wheeled her chair to the sitting room again with quick grace. Both noted that Elwood labored under some stress, and rising he said at once,—"I must go now—this has been—"

But he had over-estimated his strength, or rather, too suddenly appraised it, for his face went pallid as death, while his words faltered and failed.

Mary sprang to his side and gently put

him back in his chair. With steady hand she held him in place and cried quickly to Alice, "Telephone for Stafford," and to Libbie Lee, "Run out in the yard!" Both obeyed as if under military orders.

Then she reached for a glass with water which stood upon the table and managed to get some of it on that terrifyingly white face.

It was not more than five minutes till Stafford strode in the door, and he and Mary lifted the wasted figure and carried it to the little old day-bed where he had slept as a boy.

"Shall I get a doctor?" asked Stafford, respectfully.

"We will wait a moment and see," returned Mary, with the old family reserve strong upon her.

A moment later a slight warmth slowly crept into the face, then the eyelids fluttered wearily, and Mary knew that consciousness was returning.

His first look was one of question as he

saw Mary leaning over him; then understanding dawned, and as his eyes took in the familiar aspects of the small room which used to be his, he closed them quickly as though he could not bear it.

"Elwood," said Mary softly a little later, "shall I not send for a doctor?"

He did not answer, but slowly reached for an inner pocket, and Mary, divining, put her hand in and drew out a bottle of tablets.

"A glass of water, Stafford," she said. It was quickly brought and she questioned, "One or two?"

The sick man put up one finger, so she took one tablet and lifting the helpless head, placed the medicine between his lips, but he motioned the water away.

In half an hour the tablet had done good work and Elwood turned to Mary with a struggling smile: "I did not expect to behave like this."

"That is all right," returned Mary, "but do you not think we had better have the doctor?"

"No," returned Elwood, "I understand my condition and these emergency tablets are all that is necessary. The thing slipped up on me unaccountably this time," and he looked away that she might not see the pain that suddenly shot back into the depths of his eyes again.

They were very quiet for an hour more; then Mary brought in a cup of broth, and after he had taken it, he said: "That is good; it will do me good—but Mary, there is no getting around it, you will have me on your hands for a day or two."

And Mary for answer just stooped over and kissed him! Marvel of marvels for a Halsey! Then she busied herself about a swaying curtain, to turn briskly a moment later with the matter-of-fact statement, "We must make you comfortable in bed now," and at once left the room.

She had thought things out in the quiet hour beside his bed. "Elwood had no satchel. Yes, there were several good night shirts of father's in the attic. She would

make the little bed and get him all fixed up as soon as he was strong enough." So she now returned promptly with the necessary articles and laid them suggestively on the foot of the bed. Elwood turned away after one look, for he knew at once whence came that night shirt. With Stafford's help he was soon carefully prepared and made comfortable in bed. After a bit of rest he turned to Mary and asked, "Where is the little girl—Libbie Lee, I believe you call her?"

"Yes," said Mary, looking keenly at him and forgetting her insistence upon "Elizabeth Lee." "Do you want to see her?" she asked.

"Yes," he nodded.

So Mary brought the little girl in, and she went straight to the bed, laying a small round hand on his arm in her little-mother way. "You are sick," she announced.

"Oh, just a little out-of-sorts," he smiled back at her. And Mary left them to dismiss Stafford and look after things for the

evening meal. Alice followed her from the living room to the kitchen with the quick question, "Has he said anything yet?"

"No," replied Mary shortly, "and he isn't going to."

Alice was silent a moment, then she said confidently, "For some reason he does not want us to know he has any connection with her."

Mary said nothing. Things were much too complicated for speech just then, so far as she was concerned.

A little later, as the two sisters sat in the living room, Mary, in a glance through the open door, saw Elwood take the little girl's face between his hands and look searchingly into it. Not a move of objection did the child make, and Mary, watching involuntarily, saw the intent look soften, then heard the child laugh as she was released.

During the afternoon the patient was given tablets regularly at his direction; the evening meal was over at last, and Libbie

Lee—Alice as well—tucked safely in bed, though it was early. Then Mary went in to sit quietly with Elwood again.

He turned to her in painful questioning almost at once: "Mary, what child is that who calls you 'Uncle Mary'?"

There was a quick gasp for breath immediately following.

"Elwood, you had better not talk any more to-night," said Mary, decidedly. "You need sleep."

With a determined gathering of his forces, he returned, "But, I must talk. I could almost claim that child for my own! She is so like my own might have been at her age—like my baby's mother," he whispered. "That is what made me flunk so completely to-day," he added, at last, while his whimsical smile crept faintly in again.

"Yours?" returned Mary questioningly.

"Yes, I had a wife and child in New York —but the war—" he halted a moment for breath again, then began determinedly:

"Yes, mine. When I came back from overseas, I went to the house where my wife had taken a room for herself and baby as I was leaving—a room where she could do illustrating—and was so sure she could earn enough to keep them until my pay began to come in. You see she was southern, and had been brought up on war-loyalty—her ancestors having drained themselves in the civil war, never considering for a moment what it cost. So she wanted me to enlist the moment we declared war in the great world-conflict. Of course I wanted to myself, but I thought for the beginning it was better for the young fellows who had no families, to go. But Florence would not hear to it—she knew she could take care of herself and the baby—who was a year and a half old—for she had taken care of herself before we were married, and baby wouldn't make it a bit harder—only easier, she declared. So, I was among the first to go, and cheerful letters came out to me in the trenches—and in the hospitals—as often

as they could find me, till about a month before the armistice was signed. Then, they stopped—and I never heard again."

He had to rest here, his breath coming short again, but when Mary tried to persuade him to wait before talking more, he raised a protesting hand.

"I got back as quickly as I could after a round of hospital experience, but it was a year later, and then I searched till I found that my wife had died at a hospital here during the first influenza epidemic, but I could not learn a thing about the baby. Two obscure young people haven't many friends in New York, and the city was panic-stricken with that first terrible onslaught of influenza, while Florence had only two old aunts as relatives, left in South Carolina. They had not been notified of her death, and were distressed at her long silence; so there was nothing to find out in that direction. After months of search I found the landlady of the house where she and the baby had been, but this woman could only tell me

that the baby was sick, also, when the mother died and the child probably died, too. I asked about the trunk and she said it was left in the house when she moved away, as nobody claimed it. The hospital authorities also told me they felt sure the baby died, if it had been brought there, though they admitted they had no record of it. But it was such a time of stress and confusion that they thought the baby had probably been buried with the mother and no record made of it. Of course there was no money that anybody knew about, and no one to look after things, so—" and his voice sank to a whisper, "I don't even know where she is buried—at least which is her grave."

"Now, Elwood, you must rest a while," said Mary with real authority, adding softly after a moment: "You know her spirit wasn't buried, Elwood, nothing could touch that!"

"Such a wonderful spirit she had, too," he whispered.

Mary passed her hand gently, again and again, over his forehead while he rested. Then he began once more: "I finally gave up, as there seemed absolutely nothing further that I could do; and, disheartened, with a wound which had put the left lung pretty much out of commission, and seriously injured the heart, it did not seem worth while to try even to live for a time. But New England blood is not the sort that usually gives up—though it can be terribly stubborn at times," and they smiled faintly in mutual understanding.

"I went to a soldiers' hospital in New York then, and finally fell into story-writing —which I had done before as a side-line under an assumed name—and which served me a good turn. I remained there, for it seemed best, till I ventured to come here—just to see the old place. I did not intend to bother you. I came over in a taxi, and had them let me out in the old laurel lot; I knew it must be in full bloom.

"That is all—you know what is to be, and

of course the hospital is the place for me," he ended.

Mary would not argue the last statement with him then, and she knew no words of response for such a tragic story as his, so she only repeated gently at last:

"Now, you must sleep. Shall there be another tablet?"

"No," he returned, "you can put them where I can get them. I am accustomed to looking out for myself, largely." And the relaxed look upon his face said plainly as words to her, "I am better for telling you." But she had not answered his question about the child, not even after hearing his story, and his wild hope died down. As to what unexpected, marvelous thing had come into Mary's life he had no right to probe.

For hours that night Mary lay in her bed not sleeping. Of course she listened for sounds from her brother's room, but her mind was too full of thought for sleep under any circumstances.

Whose child, indeed, was Libbie Lee? Though he did not know, still it might be Elwood's—for whose else could it be? But how had it come to her? Perhaps someone who knew Elwood did, after all, get the child at once from the hospital after the mother's death, and knowing of Elwood's past, had sent the child to her to rear. Of course it was some one with plenty of money—and Elwood's story did not indicate wealthy friends! But many people had money after the war who did not have it before! If it were not Elwood's, why should it have been sent to her? (Her whimsical claim of fancy that it was hers and "her husband's" did not even give an echo in this time of earnest probing!) Oh, it was a heart-breaking tangle and mystery! All she could see now was that she should have been straightforward in the beginning—insisting on knowing whose child it was, and who had sent it. Instead, she had been so afraid of losing it that she would not question anything—and bluffed herself and

the town with a bravado that, at the moment, seemed amazing! But—how she did love the child! For her own part she did not care where it came from, and she simply could not run any risk of losing it now! Over and over she pursued desires, facts and conclusions in a ceaseless round, until finally an unselfish and definite determination sent her spirit into the restfulness of sleep. The decision was this: she would at once find out all she could about the child, *whatever the consequences!* If it was Elwood's child, it was due him to know it—and there was no time to lose.

Next morning the determination was unshaken, and finding Elwood fairly comfortable after the night, she said to Alice in the kitchen while Libbie Lee cared for the patient, "Alice, I am going to find out all I can about the child as promptly as possible." Then she told the details of her conversation with Elwood, and all the reasoning that had brought her to this decision.

Breakfast was barely over when a tele-

gram went speeding to the bank in New York:

"Must know at once any facts about child, Elizabeth Lee Starling, sent to me some months ago. Promptness imperative."

In two hours the reply was in her hands:

"We have no facts. Have wired party who may have, and hope you may soon receive some satisfactory word."

Mary and Alice had agreed that nothing about this must be said to Elwood, for it would be cruel to raise so great a hope for him when there was uncertain promise of fulfillment. Nothing more was said to him either about his confidence to Mary, and he, in turn, did not repeat his question, "Whose child is that?" He accepted the "Uncle Mary," also, without further remark. Family reticence stood them all in good stead during the two days that followed.

At dark that evening came another wire which said tersely:

"Party starting immediately from Oklahoma with all information available. Will go direct to you."
(Signed again by the bank.)

This, of course, meant that there must be continued suspense, and it was still best that there should be no discussion.

Elwood seemed to delight in the child, and she liked nothing better than being little nurse to him; or hearing him in his low, relaxed voice, tell some pretty story to her. He spoke no more of going, and on the afternoon of the day following his arrival, as Mary and Alice started out to "do" the dinner dishes, he smiled at them and said, "Now, Libbie Lee and I are going to tell secrets, and please don't anybody come here, or in the sitting-room, until she lets you know that we are all through."

"Certainly," laughed Mary and Alice, as they left to speculate over what he might mean.

When they were gone he turned to the little girl and said, "I want you to help me about something. Will you do it?"

"Oh, I'd love to! I so love to help! Uncle Mary lets me, sometimes!"

He smiled tenderly upon her, and went

on: "Well, what I want you to do is this: go to the secretary in there—" and he pointed to the sitting room beyond.

"That great tall thing," agreed Libbie Lee, excitedly.

"Yes," he returned; "and you see that little brass knob on the door?"

"Yes," she agreed again, awe creeping into her voice.

"That's good," he said; "now I want you to climb up in a chair so that you can reach that knob, and then turn it and open the door."

"Oh, but Uncle Mary won't let me—she won't let me touch that! And Auntie Alice told me long time ago, when I first came that it holds Uncle Mary's chains, and then I didn't want to touch it!"

"I see," returned her listener, adding under his breath, "I suspect so."

Quickly recovering himself, he smiled again re-assuringly at the child, and said, "That was just right; but I, too, have some things in the old secretary, and I know all

about the chains Auntie Alice was talking about. She was just making fun when she said 'chains'; she really meant old papers that are in the secretary, which make Uncle Mary, as you call her, a lot of trouble. Now I want to get them out, for they are my chains as well as hers, and I am going to fix them so they won't ever make her any more trouble. Don't you want to help me do it?"

The little girl looked doubtful—and how Elwood wished he might rise and get the papers himself! But he knew the least attempt to walk might be fatal, now. The morning had not brought the renewed vigor he expected—and his time might be short. So he turned to Libbie Lee again with an urgent smile.

"I can watch you every minute, you see," putting her little face down beside his. And she looked with him to the sitting-room, then brightened decidedly as she raised her head and turned to him once more. So he urged again: "There's a little tin box that

you will see just as soon as you open the door,—and that is what I want you to bring to me."

"Are you sure Uncle Mary won't care?"

"It will make her very happy! But you must remember that it is just a secret that you and I—" then he stopped a moment, going on again with, "which you must keep for me till Uncle Mary finds it out for herself. Can you keep a secret?"

"I love to keep a secret! I never told Uncle Mary what Auntie Alice told me about the 'chains,' because Auntie Alice said it was to be a secret for her and me."

"All right," he said, "you are just the little girl for me, and you and I are going to have a secret while we do a beautiful thing for Uncle Mary!"

So the child tiptoed into the living room, pushed a chair up to the awesome old secretary—looking back at Elwood every other moment, till the knob was turned, just as he told her; and then, as the door swung

round, there, sure enough, lay the tin box! She had it in a moment, and scrambling down, ran quickly to the bedside again.

Elwood patted her hand, then opened the old box, took out the paper he wanted and said to her as gayly as he could, "This paper is the one that Auntie Alice called 'Mary's chains,' because it has bound her down to hard work for many years. But it will never do it again, for you and I have taken it away, and I am going to fix it so it won't ever trouble her any more."

"Oh, how nice that is! I am so glad now, I did do it—but I was scared—only you looked at me all the time."

"Well, that is fine," said he, "and I will look at you now while you put the box back, just where you found it."

"Oh, I'm not afraid, now that the 'chains' are all gone."

And she went back, climbed up again beside the old secretary, put the box in its place and closed the door without ever once looking back at him. She clapped her

hands then, scrambled down and ran to him; but, after a squeeze, he sent her in once more to put the chair in its right place.

"Now that we have everything all done, we won't think any more about it. But, after I go away, if you ever see Uncle Mary troubled about anything, you just tell her what we did to-day. Will you remember?"

"Yes, I'll remember," she said, her little face growing old in "remembering," as it had had to do in the "Home" when charged with what seemed responsibilities. Then, he sent her to tell Auntie Alice and Uncle Mary that they might come in any time they wanted to—and that was such fun—telling them what they might do!

As for Mary and Alice, their minds had been busy, and their tongues as well, with the thought of who the "party" could be that was bringing information from far Oklahoma about their little girl. It was certainly a problem beyond solving. When they came back into the living room, Mary went to Elwood at once to see if he was com-

fortable, and bring him some broth. After he had taken it, he said to her as casually as he could:

"Did you say since I came that Parson Stillwell was still living?"

"Yes," returned Mary, "and pretty well for over seventy years."

"I'd like to see him, Mary," he said. "Can't you send that chauffeur of yours for him?" he added, with a smile to hide the feeling that was beneath the request.

"Certainly," replied Mary, "if you think you feel strong enough to see him. I sent him a note yesterday, telling him I thought quiet was the best thing for you, and asking him to let folks know that you were here, but not to let them come."

He looked at Mary in surprise at this, remembering the family way of keeping things entirely to themselves; he had thought she would disapprove of his wanting to see even the old parson. But the way was instantly made smooth by this, so different Mary.

It was not later than half an hour till the minister came, and during that time Elwood had rested completely with his door closed.

When Mr. Stillwell left after an interview alone with Elwood, the old minister carried a paper and quite a sum of money hidden in his Sunday coat. And neither he nor that most orthodox garment had a bit of a look of guilt about them!

CHAPTER XVIII

DEVELOPMENT

On the second day after receipt of the last telegram in the brown cottage, a well-dressed stranger appeared again at the hotel in Barringer. He was of medium height and good proportions, dark brown hair, serious eyes and determined jaw. But, with a smile, his eyes lit up as though electrified.

He was evidently a business man, for there seemed to be no time to lose as he made his plans for indefinite hire of a taxi, and started down the hotel steps.

But a lounger in the soft May air that pervaded the hotel veranda, suddenly called to him:

"Say, stranger, I've got some Sunfield news for you!"

The stranger hesitated a moment; then

said pleasantly, "I don't believe I have any time for gossip to-day," and was about to continue on his way. But the lounger was not to be denied. He leaned over the banisters and his voice carried easily: "Say, I saw Sophie Stoneham to-day and she says that Elwood Halsey has got back, and he and Mary have made up. Says Sunfield's beginning to think Mary's sprouted wings!"

If he had more to say, the stranger did not know what it was; for, with a wave of his hand, he was down the steps to meet the taxi-cab which drew up in front of the hotel, and in another moment he was off, on the road to Sunfield.

CHAPTER XIX

A COMING AND A GOING

It was evening of the third day; a golden and green evening of promise after two days of rain. Mary and Alice could not restrain a nervous tension—Mary's having a degree of strange outreach in it—as though something long pending were coming to fruition; or, rather as though she had dreamed all that already had come and was to come, and that the dream, once gone over, was being repeated. There was also a peculiar assurance mixed with her strained expectancy.

Elwood's bodily strength did not gain, and his mind seemed perfectly passive. He talked little, but his eyes kindled constantly when Libbie Lee was in sight—as she usually was, for she liked nothing bet-

ter than to "do things" for him, or sit and talk to him.

So the third day had passed, and it was just after they had had their tea that the expected whirr of an auto came from the street, and a man was seen to alight and walk briskly up the front path to the door while the taxi waited. Mary at the first sound closed Elwood's room, and looking out toward the front again, felt a sudden leap of heart at something familiar in the gait of the man approaching. But there was no time—

His ring was at the door—she had opened it and stood face to face with the caller—a well-dressed, well-built man of perhaps thirty-one, with a fine, serious face which lit up instantly at Mary's low, astonished cry:

"Winthrope Arnold!"

"Yes, Mary," he smiled.

And for a moment she did not move, then—she was asking him in, and introducing him to Alice. As for Libbie Lee

she ran to him instantly, and smiling up in his face, said, "I remember you!"

He took her at once upon his knee in much evident pleasure:

"You do remember me? That is fine! I was afraid you wouldn't."

"Yes," she went on excitedly, "you came to the 'Home', and you took me on your knee, just like this, and you talked to me and told me stories and asked me, Oh lots of things! And you read to me and showed me picture books. You stayed a long time, Oh 'most all day, and you sat by me at dinner and put nice things on my plate! Then the next day a man came and a nurse, in a car—but not near as nice as our car—and took me to the train and brought me here to Uncle Mary and Auntie Alice."

This immediate childish chatter was a great relief to them all, but when she came to the innocent "Uncle Mary," Mary Halsey's face flamed scarlet.

But Winthrope Arnold, glancing up at

her, smiled with such repressed humor and delight in his eyes that the flame died down, and there was question instead, upon her sensitive face.

Reminiscences between the two old friends seemed about concluded, and Mary said, "Now, Libbie Lee, we are going to let you take care of our patient while Mr. Arnold and Alice and I have a talk."

The little girl looked her surprise and would have liked to stay, but after an instant's hesitation she went obediently in, and was quite as ready to talk there when Elwood's eyes welcomed her.

"My brother is ill there," said Mary, in a low voice, "and we will talk quietly lest we disturb him. He is accustomed to Libbie Lee and loves to hear her chatter," she added.

Instinctively they drew close together and Mr. Arnold at once began upon the purpose of his coming, ignoring the recognition which had passed between him and Mary, greatly to her relief.

"I am afraid what I know about the child is going to be disappointing to you, for it is in fact fragmentary. I take it you have an urgent reason for wishing to know about her and the facts do admit of such a development appearing at any time, so I came at once."

Mary merely bowed, for full explanation of her desire to know the child's history would have been hard at that moment.

"The story is simply this; I became interested in the child at the orphanage where I found her—as you will both believe, having seen the child recognize me the moment I came in—and I talked with the orphanage authorities about her. I wanted to know her parentage, and any facts they had concerning her. I found the facts very meager, indeed. She came to them at the time of the terrible influenza epidemic in New York, when hospitals were filled to overflowing, and everything was in confusion. The child was brought to the 'Home' by a trained

nurse who said that both mother and child were ill when an ambulance delivered them at the hospital; the mother was unconscious and soon died. The child grew rapidly better, but no one came to see about it, in fact no one had appeared to take charge of the mother's body, and they did not know what to do with the child. But the nurses had become very fond of it, and under ordinary circumstances they would have kept it much longer, but the head nurse on the floor was very impatient of its staying, so one of the nurses took the matter in her own hands, carrying the child to this orphanage, of which she knew, and which was an unusually homey and well-managed place."

As he reached this point Mary and Alice exchanged glances, for so far it fitted in perfectly with Elwood's story. Noting this Mr. Arnold immediately took a little case from his pocket. "Here is the chief hope of perfect identification. It is a little ring that was tied to the child's finger and which

the 'Home' had placed in their bank, together with the facts I have given you, and then transferred them all to me."

With eager eyes first Mary, and then Alice, looked at a little gold circlet with peculiar carving, and found within it the initials F. D. H. from E. H! Neither could speak for sudden tears and high hopes, while Winthrope Arnold watched them in keen silence.

At last Mary said unsteadily, "It is possible that the child is our brother's. This possibility caused me to wire the bank—and now everything fits in with our hope, so far as we can see. Our brother will know definitely about the ring, of course. I will prepare him somewhat for it and send Libbie Lee back to you," she ended, looking at Alice.

With the sudden exchange of nurses Elwood looked up in surprise at Mary's flushed and excited face.

"Elwood," she said, as quietly as she could, "can you bear a great possible joy,

or perhaps raised hope and great disappointment?"

"The child!" he exclaimed. "It is something about her! I know it!" Then more quietly; "Yes, I can bear anything," and an other-world look in his eyes lit up the shadows.

"You are right. It is about the child—your child, I hope." And then Mary went rapidly over the facts she had just heard till she came to the little ring and his lips barely whispered, "Let me see it."

When it was in his hands the joy in that wasted face was beyond telling about.

At last he could say to Mary,—"Florence and I bought this just before I went to war—Florence said, 'So that she could have something to remember me by,'—and I knew she meant if I did not come back.

"It has baby's initials and mine in it—Florence Darlington Halsey—named for her mother—bring her to me, Mary—" he ended brokenly.

But Mary hovered over him anxiously a

moment—"Elwood, dear, we must not frighten her, you know."

At this he took instant control of his failing forces and replied firmly, "I will not."

Mary stepped back to where the others waited:

"He confirms everything," she whispered. Turning to the child she said brightly as she could manage, "Elwood wants you, dear."

The child was keenly conscious of the strong under-current of high emotion about her, and she stood bewildered at Mary's word, so that Mary must at last lead her in, leaving immediately afterward.

So the father had his moment alone with the little girl, and he didn't frighten her in the least, for after a brief time she came smiling back into the living-room to say carefully,—"Father wants to see Mr. Arnold, now." It was evidently a little lesson he had taught her and she was so pleased to repeat it.

There were questions Elwood must ask Mr. Arnold and as soon as the brief greet-

ings between the two men were over, there came from Elwood: "What about the child's name? How did it become changed?"

"They explained that to me; for, like you, I questioned, seeing that it did not correspond with the initials in the ring," replied Mr. Arnold. "The nurse said, when they asked the child her name, she would only say 'Darling,' which sounded more like Starling as she said it, and growing so fond of her they had given her different names. One called her Elizabeth, another said Libbie Lee, and they all agreed on 'Starling' for her last name. They taught her to say that her name was Elizabeth Lee Starling, because they loved to hear her say it. The nurses had taken her first from the floor where they worked, and had kept her in their dormitory as long as they dared; then, finally, since nobody had come to inquire for her, one of them took her to the orphanage. All this was recorded in the books of the 'Home,' so that I could see for myself. And the ring had been taken from her fin-

ger—for it was too large and simply tied on—lest it get lost with only institutional care for the child, amid so many other children. It was put in the orphanage bank for safe-keeping."

"Everything fits in with what I found when I came back from over-seas," said Elwood, triumph in his voice.

Mr. Arnold congratulated him with quiet warmth, not only on finding his child, but on finding one so lovable as Libbie Lee.

"You can see she was just the child I wanted," he put in, at last, quickly. Then, as quickly, he realized it would seem odd that he should want a child at all! "I am a bachelor, it is true," he smiled, and turned to Mary who had stood by during the interview. "Just why I wanted the child I am going to tell Mary, when she will let me. You do not know, perhaps, Mr. Halsey, that Mary and I are old friends—"

"No, I do not," said Elwood. Then added, "A friend she found after I left home, I suppose?"

"No," said Mr. Arnold, "a short time before." And Mary's face flamed like a girl's again, while Elwood looked puzzled. But Winthrope Arnold was taking things in his own hands, as he had a way of doing.

"I am going to tell her as soon as possible, why I wanted this dear little girl," he repeated. And Elwood knew as he looked into their faces that there was a heart-story between them. Winthrope went on, however, closing the subject for the moment: "For you, Mr. Halsey, I am sure nothing more is needed. You have complete evidence that would stand in any court, and I cheerfully turn over any claim I have, though I am exceedingly fond of the child. Surely there was a guiding eternal spirit that brought together these threads for you at this time," he ended with gentle reverence.

And Elwood murmured in response: "I know it." After a few moments' silence he turned to Mary again with the low cry: "Bring her to me!"

They brought her and left the two to-

gether for an hour upon which no one intruded. Then the child opened the door once more, and looking at Winthrope Arnold, said: "Fa-fa-ther wants you!" Father was a word that she had never used, and really hardly knew.

The two went quickly back to Elwood, the child holding Winthrope's hand tightly. Elwood gripped the two together in a close clasp, and looking into Winthrope Arnold's eyes, murmured, "She is yours, you found her," while his own searching, other-world gaze added many things to the simple words.

Winthrope returned the speechless plea in kind, his eyes saying most re-assuring things; then his lips softly questioned, "And Mary's?"

A satisfied smile was the answer, while Elwood added, "I do not mind what you call her—that will make little difference to Florence and me in our world."

"Now, I will rest," said the sick man, quite strongly, as he waved the two away.

They left him then to rest completely.

When Mary went in an hour later to take some broth, she found him resting, indeed —asleep till the eternal day dawn.

In his coat pocket was found a marked envelope containing sufficient money for all needs that followed.

It so happened that the little village of Sunfield had not had a soldier burial from the great war. She had sent some of her few sons into the great conflict, but all had come back; one or two with wounds, it was true, but all with life and limb, sight and hearing.

Now, when Elwood Halsey had come to them, broken with the long struggle overseas and at home hospitals, only to pass on to the great beyond, the town determined there should be such a burial as the little place had never known. So, it happened that flags were everywhere, hanging at half-mast it was true, but beautiful with the colors that Americans love; and a wonderful band came from New York. Winthrope

Arnold could have told how this came about. In fact when Mary asked him about it later, he replied, "I went to war—but I didn't get a scratch. They kept me here till too late, you know. I felt that this privilege belonged to me now."

With the band playing battle hymns Americans love, with flags waving, and every one that could ride or walk in the long line following the music and colors, while the glad New England May held out leaf and flower from every tree or bush along the way, it seemed a beautiful thing to little Libbie Lee. The three grown people who had her in charge had done what they could to make it seem so to her. For Mary had said, at once, to the other two, that this must be so; and she was exceedingly grateful that a revelation of the hearts and minds of children had given her some understanding just in time; also that she, herself, had grasped anew the beauty of His plan for the world, which included death as well as life.

At the sloping hillside, as the long line

broke and gathered in the soft grass and about the silent shafts of white, Parson Stillwell's fine old voice rang out in the triumphal passages about "mortality and immortality," his white hair softly waving in the breeze, and his head lifted in reverent, joyful assurance.

Young Stanley stood by his side, looking eagerly up into his face, and in a moment Libbie Lee stood there, too. Stooping, as he finished the last triumphant word, the old minister picked the little girl up in his arms and made his brief, ringing benediction with the child clasped close to him. Then he stepped away, carrying her in his arms back to the limousine where he placed her on the back seat to wait for the others.

As he did so, the little girl looked up and met his smile; "Wasn't it all beautiful?" she said.

"Yes, dear child, it was," said the old man.

And that was the sweet memory which Libbie Lee was destined to carry through all the after years of her life.

CHAPTER XX

FEMININE OBSTINACY AND MASCULINE DECISION

It was several days later before Winthrope Arnold found time and opportunity for his talk with Mary.

Knowing there was no hotel in the place, he had asked Stafford, the chauffeur, how he was being taken care of; then went at once to Sam and Maggie Oldham and persuaded them to take him in also, which they did, making shift in some way that housewives know about.

Dismissing his taxi, he had remained in the village and had been close at hand during the time of need for the Halsey girls. When all was over he still lingered.

Mary was longing for, and yet dreading so much, the talk with him, that she could not make plans for it. Hence it devolved

upon Winthrope. He caught a moment alone with her.

"Mary," he urged, "I must have that talk with you, undisturbed. Can you plan for it?"

The warm, red blood ran to her soft hair. "I—don't know how," she said, her voice unsteady.

"Well, I do," he returned, firmly.

Not a word more was said, and in a moment Alice's chair wheels were softly heard as she turned into the room. Winthrope stepped instantly forward.

"Alice, we're planning a ride this morning for you and Libbie Lee. The little girl needs it, and it will be worth a great deal to you, as well. Mary says she has a woman doing some work in the kitchen, which she must overlook, and she and I are going to talk over some business matters, which must be taken up before I leave."

Alice agreed at once—and she was not unaware of the processes by which this had been brought about. Mary's face would not

cool down, for one thing, and besides there was a decided atmosphere of masculine decision and dispatch. So it did not surprise her to be bundled off without ceremony, while Libbie Lee, though not so discerning, was equally amenable; yet, when it was also planned that they should go by and get Stanley to go with them, it could not be put down perhaps to telepathic or psychic manifestation that the little girl should lean her head out of the car as they started off, and cry, "We're going to be gone a *long* time!"

When Mary and Winthrope stood alone, he grasped her hands, then searched her eyes with his.

"Mary, I've waited a long time," he said.

"I know, Winthrope," she returned, her lips quivering. "It has been wonderful—your faithfulness. And I have been true, too, to you—but I have been so unlovely about it! You don't know!"

"No, and I don't want to know! What does it matter, now? We stand here free—and it is spring!"

And he would have taken her to him, but she put him back with a cry: "There are many things you do not know—and I don't know how I am going to tell you all of them!" Her face quivered again as she turned from him.

But the ten years since they had met had made a very determined man of Winthrope Arnold. He drew Mary to a chair with a sure hand that she did not resist; then he seated himself beside her.

"I am going to tell you some things first," he said, "and make some apology on my own account. When you so flatly told me ten years ago that you could not marry me, that your life must be given to family demands, I was young, I had nothing, and I did not know how to answer so decided an argument as you put up. So I went away, with my youth suddenly gone, and a sort of reckless resentment in its place. I took a train for the west at once.

"I wrote you twice," he went on, looking keenly at her, and she murmured, "I know."

Then he continued: "My yearning, trusting youth sent a faint echo back, you see; but when no replies came, it fled beyond recall. I determined to see the world, so I traveled from point to point, earning enough to travel, but caring for nought beside. Of course I saw hundreds of women, but no woman made the least appeal to me; and, naturally, I did not learn to know any woman well. Weariness of change inevitably comes to most men, and after the war I settled down in Oklahoma, becoming interested in oil development. It caught me with the freshness of a new game, and to my astonishment I went into it with zest—and I won—magnificently.

"Now, Mary, what do you suppose I thought of first, when I found myself in possession of more money than I knew what to do with?" He did not wait for her to answer. Bending near, his face alight, he whispered—"You!"

Mary put out a hand in pathetic appeal. She felt that she could not stand it!

Reading at once the stress of her emotion, he leaned back and began again in straightforward fashion.

"Now, here is where my apology comes in. I started for here, and put up for a few hours in Barringer. You cannot realize the uncertainties that pressed upon me. I hadn't the least idea what had happened to you since I saw you last. You might be married, or not living, you know," he pleaded. "So I was tempted, and interviewed a lounger about the hotel, asking first a simple question about Sunfield; and finding immediately that he was born here and knew everybody, I asked him to tell me about some of the old families; and, before he was through, I heard about you."

"Then you heard some very unlovely things, I know! It was inevitable, Winthrope," and her tongue being loosened, Mary was obliged to pour out her story. "Oh, I was so ugly and narrow, and hateful, that the town despised me, and I do not

blame them. I worked hard—and some might admit that I was unselfish, but that did not help matters. All my hard work, selfish or unselfish, could count for nothing for God or man, because I was so bitter and mean and domineering!"

Her eyes were swimming with tears, at last, and he gently drew her against his breast.

"You did not let me finish," he smiled, as she recovered herself again. "I heard about how hard life had been for you—and then I came to see."

She looked up at him in quick inquiry.

"No," he smiled again, "and here is where you must forgive most. I came up here to your front door one night, and looked upon you and Alice as you sat here. Your face was turned to me, Mary, and I saw what hard work and bitterness had done for you. I knew it was not worth while to speak to you then—for you or for me," he added honestly; "and yet I could not give up the sweetheart whom I knew, in some undefined

way, still held within her the possibilities of sweet, true living.

"I went away, but I do not give up easily these later years. I said to myself, 'What could bring rest and fuller life to her? Money? Yes, but not money alone. A child! A little girl! No real woman's heart can resist a little child!' And I knew you would give her the best of life principles. If you could not make her happy, I would take her away. But I had faith that you would. So I set about finding a child, and, in a way that only God can bring about, I was led to your own brother's little daughter. You know the rest," he ended.

"Yes, yes" she hurried to say, "and I cannot thank you enough. You read aright, nothing in the world could have done for me what that little child has done. And, Winthrope, I must tell you what perhaps I shall never want to tell you again; somehow I felt in my soul that you had sent that child! I told Alice I would not take it if I thought it was Elwood's!"

And she was caught for a moment with tragic recollection of her bitterness toward her brother. But she forced herself to go on:

"Alice would say, 'Whose else can it be?' And I had no answer—but somehow I knew! The town settled it at once that she was Elwood's child, and when they asked how I got her I always answered, 'I stole her,' which they did not believe, but which was true, because I could not think Elwood had sent her, and so I had no certain claim. I had taken something which did not really belong to me.

"It was strange my taking the child, of course; it was so out-of-character," and she smiled a little grimly, "but the whole thing seemed fore-ordained and predestinated, as the old theologians say, and I was in a certain state of almost hilarious acquiescence from the moment the bank's letter came. Of course you had planned it so I could not have stopped the child's coming to the house if I had wanted to. But I did

not want to! I wanted her from the first moment I heard of her!"

Winthrope Arnold listened with deep satisfaction, and was about to take advantage of Mary's attitude, but she was not through.

"It was really funny about the money that came with the child. Any one, knowing me, would have said I would refuse to use such large sums of money, not knowing whence they came. The town thought, of course, that Elwood had gotten rich, somehow," she threw in. Then continuing: "But I felt a strange right to it, that even Alice couldn't understand, though I figured out to her what my services were worth to the child; and then the bank wrote me as to what was intended in the way of up-keep for a home for the child. So, it satisfied my conscience. Let me tell you just how I planned it, for I have kept books," she smiled, and immediately started to rise, but he held her back with determined hand.

"Mary, Mary! What do I care about

that? We will have plenty of time for that later, if you must show me. Now we have only a few precious moments for vital things!"

And she yielded again.

"This is all beautiful that you have told me. I am more grateful than I can ever say that I was so reënforced in my undertaking by your own touch with the eternal current of things. But now, now I want to know when you are coming to me! To me and my little girl—for Elwood gave her to me in those last moments I had with him—to me—and to you, if you willed it so."

Mary looked surprised, and distressed too, beyond measure.

"Winthrope," she said, "that is as it should be, of course. You have every right to her," her lips quivered pitifully, "but I have not told you all. I—I have an obligation that I must meet. There is no one else to do it!"

"What is it?" he demanded.

"I cannot tell you. It is a family obligation."

If Winthrope had been a swearing man, a "swear" might have given him relief. But he was not, and so a furious thought ran through him: "Of all the obstinacy in the world, New England has the—most outrageous type!"

Mary knew she was pushing him to the limit, and yet family pride could not let her yield!

"Give me three years," she cried, "and then I am ready! I can do it in three years!"

"I will not give you three years," he said evenly, not pausing to ask what it was she could do in three years; and just then Stanley burst in the door with Libbie Lee behind him.

CHAPTER XXI

DEPARTURES

After the mid-day meal, while Mary attended to things in the kitchen, and the children played out-doors, Winthrope Arnold found the opportunity he next wanted for a talk with Alice Halsey. He drew his chair up to her and said at once, "I want to have a talk with you."

She smiled readily, but a little sadly, in acquiescence, feeling instantly that she knew what he wanted to talk about. The faces of both Mary and Winthrope had told an unsatisfactory story, the moment she came in; and a subtle constraint between them since, had confirmed it. But she was much mistaken as to the matter which Winthrope wished to present to her. He began at once in his straight-forward way.

"You will forgive me if I speak of some-

thing personal to you, I am sure. Am I right in thinking that a fall has deprived you of the joy of walking?"

"Yes," she answered, surprised indeed. "My limbs became perfectly helpless,—especially the right one, after a fall from a step-ladder. They are not exactly paralyzed, but they will not work, though there does not seem to be any real reason why they shouldn't!" and she smiled a little rueful smile, which checked the impulse, running fast to her tongue, to add—"I think Mary feels so, sometimes!"

"That is just as I thought," Winthrope said. "Now I want to tell you about a doctor out in my country who does wonderful things, especially where there has been a fall and some sort of displacement of the spinal vertebræ. Over and over I have known him to get people upon their feet who had not walked for years. I want him to try to do it for you!"

Her gentle face was a study for a moment: hope, long buried, flew forth to new light,

and her eyes took fire for an instant. But difficulties fell fast upon hope's weakening wings, and pale with the rapid transition, she faltered: "But I couldn't go to him, you know."

"Why?" he demanded, then answered himself. "Of course you can go to him, and I mean that you shall!"

"But, you don't know! I couldn't make the journey—and then it would cost so much."

"You can make the journey! You see I have traveled a great deal, and have seen people going about in all sorts of conditions. And, as for the other thing—do you suppose the money I have made is mine? In a sense it is, of course. But it is in my hands as a trust, and I can have no joy in it if it does not serve others. I spend a lot of it selfishly, I admit, for I am no saint; but always I am really conscious that it has been given to me in trust. Now I want to spend some of it for you—you will let me have this joy, won't you?" And his com-

pelling eyes seemed to make denial impossible. Besides, that thrill of hope flew high again, and she found her lips murmuring, "I will go."

"That is fine!" exclaimed Winthrope in keen delight. "Now, you will let me plan everything, will you not? Just be passive, please," he smiled, "and I promise you I will see that it is no ordeal to you, whatever the final outcome—which, naturally, I cannot guarantee."

"I shall have to let you plan," said Alice, "for I am very helpless, both from my long infirmity and from the shut-in days. Though the rides this spring have done wonders for me," she ended gratefully.

"Well, now, I have business in New York, which must be looked after as promptly as possible; so I will wire a doctor friend, whom I have there, to send me at once the best trained nurse he knows. She will get here in the morning, then we can start in the afternoon."

Alice's breath was gone! When she found it she exclaimed, "Oh, I couldn't possibly get ready in that time! Why, I haven't told Mary, yet!"

Winthrope smiled a little grimly at this, but he only said, "That will take a very few moments; and as to getting ready, we will stop in New York a few days for my business matters, and the nurse can get anything which she and you together, may decide you will need."

Mary stepped into the room, at this juncture, wholly unprepared for what was to come.

Winthrope began at once: "Mary, I am sure there is hope for Alice to walk again. We have a doctor out in my country that I feel certain can do the trick. She has consented to try it, and we leave for New York to-morrow afternoon."

Mary's spirit tottered for an instant, and her limbs almost did likewise, but with her usual unfailing strength, she rallied, and finally said a little coldly:

"Then, since it is all settled, you do not need a word from me."

"But Mary," cried Alice, "I will not do it if you do not want me to!"

Mary was on trial a moment, but the best within her won out.

"Alice, if I could see you able to walk again it would be the greatest joy to me! As to how you and Winthrope have arranged things, I really have no right to question. You should be allowed to make your own decisions." This was a new Mary, indeed, and Alice's eyes filled, while Winthrope said:

"We both thank you, Mary. You have a right, and neither of us fails to recognize it. But, that you are so graciously willing to waive it, makes me very happy indeed."

Then he told of the plans in detail.

Going to-morrow! The sister of whom she had taken care for so many years! It would seem almost that Alice had followed Elwood! Again Mary's spirit tottered.

But again she was on trial, and she summoned the ghost of a smile, as she said quietly: "So it is all arranged. I am glad, for I could never have done it." And she stooped and kissed her sister!

It had been years since their lips had met. There was really no call for it in their monotonous living—and then New England does not wear its heart on its sleeve! But Mary had left the drab plain of repression for a more colorful stratum where the emotions play their daily part in life.

Mary turned instantly and left the room, while neither Alice nor Winthrope spoke again. Alice, indeed, was softly crying, and Winthrope's eyes looked suspicious as he went to the door and looked out to see if the children were nearby.

Libbie Lee caught a glimpse of him and came running. "Do you want us? Are we going to ride?"

Winthrope looked at his watch before he answered her: "Yes, you may come in in five minutes." Then he stepped back and

spoke to Mary, whom he knew to be just in the next room.

"Mary, may we have the car for a ride—all of us, the children want to go and I will take them. I would like to send my wire promptly."

"Certainly," said Mary, coming to the door, her face quite calm, while Alice spoke immediately. "You and the children go. Let Mary and me have a little time alone!" Which was just what Winthrope had in mind.

Alice and Mary talked constantly over details of the coming trip, because they did not dare touch upon things of deeper import. Mary, with capable hand, gathered together the things Alice would need, and took the few stitches that were necessary to put them in order; for, New England-like, they did not allow things to lie in dormant peace which were in need of repair! Looking over Alice's belongings, and making decisions as to what to take, quite filled their time.

But, while Mary's hands were busy, her heart was really dominated by one thing: "What would Winthrope do about Libbie Lee?" Not that she was anxious from the money side—she had visioned many things mentally which she might do, and she knew there would never be a return to needle-slavery for her. But she could not bear to be parted from the child! She was his by every right, would he take her with him? But she could not bring herself to ask, though she felt that Alice probably knew. Alice, on her part, had never given that matter a moment's thought; she supposed, of course, the child would be left with Mary. The thing that filled Alice's mind was: "What had happened between Winthrope and Mary?" She pleaded with her eyes to know, but Mary did not look into them, and would not have answered if she had. So the two kept on the surface, with its clutterings of the material, and neither visioned the heart of the other. Before they realized the passage of time, Libbie Lee was

running in at the door with Winthrope Arnold behind her.

Winthrope was carrying a new leather suit-case in one hand, and a capacious satchel in the other, both of which he smilingly put down at Alice's chair and said, "I knew you had not traveled lately, Alice, and I brought these in for you, that you might start off in style."

"They are lovely, I know," she said, accepting them in the spirit of the giver, "and I can't thank you enough. I had thought what I would do about something in which to carry my things, and I knew of nothing we had that would hold them, except a beautiful old carpet-bag that belonged to some of our ancestors; and I was afraid you might abandon me at the very start when you saw that!"

"Well, I might!" he laughed in return.

This little passage set the key-note for the departure. Each tried to keep up some surface gaiety, and so help to make easy a thing that was infinitely hard all around. Libbie

Lee was in the mind of each, and it had become evident to Mary there was no thought of her going at that time. It must be a happy thing for her, this going of Auntie Alice so far from home. She was told that Alice was to have a lovely trip away, and see lots of things she had never seen, but not a word was said as to the purpose of her going. They did not wish it talked about, in the first place; and, in the second they did not wish disappointment to come to the child if it must come to them. The Stillwells were the only friends who knew the full purpose of the trip.

Inevitably the village had its curiosity much aroused, but Dr. Stillwell had only to say in his parish calls that Alice had been so long confined at home they felt a trip away would do her good. Elwood's sudden coming and going had been hard for her, too. And he added, "Of course there is no reason now, why she should not go, even though travel for her does involve the extra expense of a trained nurse."

This implied that there was plenty of money to spend, and the town believed Elwood had died rich, while Mr. Stillwell knew nothing, as yet, to the contrary. In fact this impression had had unusual confirmation for him. So, it was taken quite as a matter of course by everybody.

As for Winthrope Arnold having come so soon after Elwood's arrival, he was tacitly explained by all as a friend of Elwood's; and his remaining for a few days later, simply meant friendship for the family, and, perhaps, attention to business arrangements which Elwood had desired. To have heard Sophie Stoneham talk, in fact, would have been to get a detailed account of the whole matter which was most reasonable, and which would have satisfied the three, especially concerned, most completely, even while they marveled and laughed over her ingenuity.

So the arrival of the trained nurse the morning after Winthrope's telegram, and the departure of the big blue limousine a

few hours later, with Mary, Libbie Lee and Stanley going to Barringer to see Alice and Winthrope off on the train, was without incident, apparently. No one was at hand, however, to note that Winthrope held Mary by a touch on her arm, for a moment alone in the sitting room before they left the cottage.

"Mary, may I leave Libbie Lee in your charge, with everything just as it has been, till the fall when Alice and I will probably return?"

"Certainly," returned Mary.

And that was all.

CHAPTER XXII

TWO INNOCENTS CONSPIRE

THE ride back from the station held all the possibilities of a veritable crucible for Mary Halsey. The separation from Alice —seeing her go out from the care and protection that Mary had given for so many years—was in itself sufficient to try Mary to the uttermost. But the word with Winthrope had been most excruciating! What did he mean?

She sank back exhausted from the strain of it all when once in the car and starting for home. It was well that the children had much to chatter over. Both had traveled, and they knew all about what Auntie Alice was going to experience. So they talked of sleepers, and the nice little tables on which folks ate, and the porters and conductors and brakemen and engineers! Each dis-

coursed concerning the thing which each had observed with the most emphasis—Stanley getting the best of Libbie Lee inevitably in the end, because he could go on to ocean liners and "rickshas" and even African coolies!

Of all this Mary caught nothing, but the unheeded childish talk was better for her than silence, and she relaxed and steadied under it, till the chauffeur saw nothing amiss when she stepped at last from the car, and taking Libbie Lee's hand went into the brown cottage of her ancestors, which held, now, only the echoes of her past.

The moment they were inside, Libbie Lee voiced the surprised feeling of both. She ran to Mary and clung to her knees, after a moment's survey of the room.

"Oh, Uncle Mary, Auntie Alice's wheel chair is gone, too!" And the little face crumpled with sobs.

That was it! They had not thought of missing the wheel chair—but it really seemed to double their sense of loss!

Mary held the little girl tightly against her breast, sitting down that she might press her closer, and for a few minutes they joined their tears. Then Mary straightened, and said:

"Oh, but this won't do! We must think what a good time Auntie Alice is going to have! How lovely for her to see new places and new people! Why, you and I are acting just as though we didn't want her to go —and we do, don't we?" she questioned, pulling up the flushed small face and smiling into it. So, Libbie Lee wiped her eyes and smiled back through her tears—which ended the shower for her.

Not so with Mary, of course; but she immediately set about making their tea-time gay and instantly hit upon the thought of having unexpected company.

"Let's invite somebody to take tea with us," she cried in merry application of kindergarten methods.

Libbie Lee was charmed: "Who, Uncle Mary—can we get?" breathlessly.

"Well," said Uncle Mary, "suppose we invite Mrs. Kittie for one," and she reached up to the old-fashioned mantel, and brought down an old-fashioned china kittie which had adorned it for at least a generation. She placed Mrs. Kittie with a flourish, upon the table, and then set plate, and knife and fork before her.

Libbie Lee laughed out; and before they got through, there was a motley company of dolls and dogs and birds and chickens, beside Mrs. Kittie, taking tea with them. They had a really hilarious meal.

But the sense of loneliness and loss pressed upon Mary's spirit indescribably when Libbie Lee was asleep, and the house full of the stillness of a sudden going. Mary had never dreamed how, during all the hard years, her taxed nerves had rested in Alice's quiet, well-balanced amiability. Now she began to see many things. She had hitherto thought herself the one who was serving, and claimed thereby unquestioned authority; while Alice, she now realized, had also

been serving, even though much after the dear fashion of those who only wait. For, though her willing hands helped what they could in the actual work, her greatest service was the anchoring of Mary's soul in the safe, sweet ties of human relationship. This, Mary now sensed with tender surprise; Alice had been her other and better self in the ten years of struggle, and—how could she, Mary, the strong one, have let her go off on this hazardous search for health, alone, as it were! There was anxious yearning over Alice from day to day that summer which greatly chastened Mary's spirit.

Then there was Elwood to think of; how many years she had hated him! She had never thought of him except with the bitter indictment: had it not been for his desertion of family interests she might have realized her brief, early dream of happiness! But the bitterness had dropped like a mask when she saw him weak and spent by the roadside that hot May day; and the short period of ministry to his needs which followed had

mellowed into mature love her latent affection for her brother, giving her an understanding of his character which had changed the recollections of many hard years, but which left for her an aching regret for his broken life, his unfulfilled hopes, that hovered over her spirit in brooding memory.

But all this was only the shadowy background of the summer's depression which lay heavily upon Mary's tried spirit as she passed from the hot, fierce impulses of a thwarted youth out into the open paths of mature understanding. There was Winthrope Arnold. Her quickened consciousness of him was a throbbing, stabbing reality every moment of that memorable season.

What had been her love for him in the first place, with only the record of a few weeks' association and one day of inner heart touch upon which she had lived for ten long years? It held nothing of sacrificial giving; it was, in reality, only a thing which had given her fantastic dreaming and bitter reactions. A really great love would

have beautified all her life. She could analyze now, with clear, swift visioning.

But, he had come again into her life, bringing convincing proof which had made Elwood's last hours full of everlasting peace, proof which had cleared from the mist of uncertainty the little girl's relationship to them, and a mature man of unusual force and winning personality had been revealed to her; a man of efficiency, of straight-forward, clean-cut integrity in any dealing, and a man with the sure anchor of reverent recognition of high obligation to God and man in his life. To such a man all her starved womanhood had reached out. And yet, when he had come to her with sureness of his own love after all the intervening years of separation, she had met him with foolish temporizing! That was what she called it now, with the keen stab of regret upon her, and the daily growing knowledge of her love for him—of the full flood of a mature woman's love that needed his strength to lean upon, that reached out for

his guidance and companionship in her life.

Oh, she did not want her own way any longer! If she could but rest in his strength and integrity and love, as she might have done had she taken it when it was freely offered to her! This was the vain cry of Mary's heart in those summer days. And it was a cry that makes the lips mute, like the mute anguish of dumb things for their mates—a thing unfathomable, holding within it all the blessed heritage that the Maker puts into life's dual completeness.

Sometimes the undercurrent of yearning would sing through her consciousness in the voiceless cry, "I love him! I love him! Oh, he will come back to me! He cannot forsake me forever!"

But only the echo of his brief decision came in reply:

"I will not wait three years for you!"

And that was what she had demanded of him!

Mary's heart was a bruised reed that well-nigh came to breaking, she thought.

But there was a small hand tugging always at hers those summer days. "Uncle Mary, aren't we going to ride? Can't we go by and get Stanley?"

So, with the agitating things of her heart pressed well out of sight, Mary forced herhelf to smile down upon the child and keep step with childhood joy.

This attitude towards Libbie Lee set the pace for Mary's summer. She gave herself to the children of the town. Her car was almost always full to overflowing, and she took them on picnics and long drives, and taught them many things of value and interest. There were historical points within their reach, which were etched into their memories with interesting accounts of the events in memory of which they were held sacred. And Mary, herself, with leisure for study of things she would pass on to them, found it an unceasing delight.

She filled her time full, that she might not think, from the day of Alice's going.

There was a significant incident, of which

she did not know, however. It occurred only a few days after the journey of Winthrope and Alice was begun, and took place when Mr. Stillwell came into the brown cottage one morning very early—in fact before Mary had finished her kitchen work.

"That's all right," he said to her at once, as she appeared in kitchen apparel. "I know I'm disgracefully early, but I took a notion for a tramp down the road—and then got tired as I reached your gate, because I wanted to see your little girl," he laughed, drawing Libbie Lee to him. "So, you go right along, Uncle Mary, and leave us to visit together."

He loved to call her "Uncle Mary," and she had also come to love the odd combination name, which really marked the opening of a new life for her. She smiled consent, her face flushed with the warmth of a June morning, which both had agreed in a brief passage on the weather, could be hotter in New England when it really tried, than anywhere else on the globe—speaking extrava-

gantly! Her hair curled about her face under the moist air of the kitchen, and the old minister said in his heart; "She has grown to be as pretty as a picture! I wonder why—"

Then she was back to her work, and he bent at once to a task which had been set for him.

He called to Mary, after a few moments, however. "Uncle Mary, we're going to shut out all your kitchen heat, if you don't mind." And, getting instant consent, he closed the door which led through the hallway back to the kitchen. Then he began his real task with Libbie Lee on his knee.

"Little girl, you remember that your father asked you to get a paper from the old secretary, here, before he left us, don't you?"

Libbie Lee nodded. Then she sat up, glad to be able to talk about it. "Yes, he did, and I was so scared! But he said it was all right, because I was helping him to throw away Uncle Mary's chains!"

The minister laughed, "So you were. And he wanted you to help me to complete the job, so that you and he could be together in it. Now I have here the nice paper that he wanted you to put in the place of the 'chains,' so I am putting it in your hands, and we will go to the old secretary and put it in the tin box in place of the bad paper which was there so long, making trouble for Uncle Mary." He was carrying her in his arms as he spoke, pressed the brass knob which opened the doors, and then bent back the lid of the old tin box, so there was nothing for the little hands to do, but lay the paper carefully in. The child did it very soberly. Then, when they turned about and sat down again, she said:

"Father told me not to tell anybody what I had done, unless Uncle Mary got very—very troubled," she hesitated in trying to make it very exact, "and then I might tell her."

Her listener murmured under his breath, "Halsey blood fighting to the last!" But

he said to her, "That is just what your father told me he said to you," making her feel it was very nice to be sharing the secret with somebody—especially with Mr. Stillwell, whom she loved so much.

The secret had, indeed, been a little burdensome to the child—when she thought of it—which was always when she was alone in sight of the old secretary; and then instantly she had run away from its sight. But now she would never feel that way again, since Mr. Stillwell knew all about it, too.

After their secret task had been done they visited together, talking of far different things and laughing aloud at times, till Mary appeared, her kitchen apron laid aside and a proposition to make to them:

"Let's go for a ride! I think that is a great deal better than a tramp, this hot morning!"

Mr. Stillwell hadn't the least disposition to disagree with her, and so the car was soon off on the road. with all the Stillwells com-

fortably placed within it, and the air lovely to skim through in the rush of a smooth-running motor.

"What do you hear from Alice?" was Grander Stillwell's first question, after they were settled.

"She is improving!" cried Mary. "She has stood on her feet for several minutes at a time, and the doctor is confident that she will walk!"

"How beautiful!" they chorused.

Indeed Alice's letters told a story of triumph all through the summer: first she had stood on her feet; next she had really taken a few steps with the nurse right at hand—and then she was walking! Letters had come frequently from the first, and the life that Alice was leading was most amazing to Mary. She was going to places—to hotels and restaurants for lunch and dinners; to lectures, to concerts and places of amusement from the very first. Winthrope saw to it that her experiences should bring a complete revelation for her from the mo-

ment that she left Sunfield. Not that he ever wrote about it. Not a line came to Mary from him. But Libbie Lee got letters from him regularly, and Mary had taught her how to answer them. Alice, herself, told constantly of his kindness and care of her.

Was it not inevitable that Mary's heart should question? He had said he would not give her (Mary) three years, and never an intimate word had he spoken or written to her since! If Alice really got well and could walk again, free and whole, much might happen—and she had always been so much more attractive and lovable than Mary! What chance would be left for her, with or without three years more of struggle? Winthrope and Alice both loved Libbie Lee—they would take her—and she—Oh, life, joy, would indeed be at an end for her!

Once she had longed to have the child alone. Now, she had it, and daily associations with the little one, depending on her

for everything—joy, love and mothering, were very precious, but at the same time pregant with suffering as she thought of losing her.

Such a summer it was indeed! It dragged endlessly along for Mary's heart, and flew from under her flying feet—for was she not making it a summer of delight for the children of Sunfield?

She was learning to suffer and smile; to bear burdens and yet to serve joyfully.

CHAPTER XXIII

JOY ARRIVES BUT TROUBLE LINGERS

TIME does not halt, whether driven either by the reins of joy or sorrow, or by the jerky, harrowing combination of both. This truth Mary Halsey discovered as mid-summer turned to late summer days, and they again merged into the alternate crisp air and hazy dreaming of September; then again as the full autumn touch of October came upon the hills about Sunfield, in a glory of red and gold; and, finally, when this beautiful panorama was at the point of whirling off in the hurry scurry of brisk, warning winds! It was just at this transition moment, when the glory of nature was ready at a touch to sink into oblivion, that a letter came from Alice, saying they would leave for home at once!

Mary read the letter in the morning, but

she could not bring herself to tell Libbie Lee until afternoon, and in the meantime the two had done many things while Mary adjusted herself. Adjusted herself to the joy of seeing Alice walking about once more? Was not that a thing she could take at once into her grateful heart without reservation? She was ashamed, humiliated over her mixed feelings! Then, in defense, she analyzed carefully; and, with the justice which marked the old Puritans from whom she sprang, she acknowledged that there was joy, and joy only in her heart for the restoration of her sister. This helped her self-respect.

But, Oh, with the realization of this glory of blessing, was there not to be the flitting of all the red and gold of hope for her, and a long winter of life begun?

Libbie Lee was at play in the yard, and Mary sat alone in the living room, where she and Alice had spent so many monotonous years together; and, under the spell of many memories clustered there, she at last

broke down in a quick rain of tears. Of course it was just at this moment that Libbie Lee appeared, for Fate so chooses, always, that some one shall bear witness to the rare yielding of a self-contained woman.

Libbie Lee had never seen Uncle Mary really cry, though their tears had mingled for a moment when Alice left them. This was different. Full of joy herself, she suddenly came upon Uncle Mary in deep, unexplained distress. The child stood as though held rigid. Then she remembered!

"Uncle Mary," she said, going slowly toward Mary, "are you—troubled?"

Mary could not answer, her throat was so unmanageable.

Libbie Lee paused a little distance from her, speechless again for a moment. Then she said carefully:

"Father told me if ever I saw you troubled that I must tell you something."

Astonishment at the child's manner and

words acted quickly upon Mary's emotions. She controlled herself immediately, and asked, "What do you mean?"

"That was what father said; if you were troubled to tell you something."

"Tell me what?" Mary was rapidly recovering vigor of manner.

"But, are you troubled, Uncle Mary?" And the child still stood a bit away.

"Yes, dear, or you wouldn't have found me so foolish."

"Then I can tell you," said the little girl, with a look of real relief. "Father asked me to get a tin box right out of this big, high sec'tary and I did, and he opened it and took out a paper, and he said that paper was your 'chains,' and we were going to throw them away, and—"

But she was breathless for a moment with the rush of thought and words.

Then, Mary, with her own mind rapidly clearing under this strange revelation, reached out and drew the little girl to her.

"Now, take time," she said, "and tell me

all about it when you have rested a bit. We don't have to hurry."

Libbie Lee instantly relaxed, and with her arms about Mary's neck, she went on: "Auntie Alice told me your chains were in there when I first came, but she said for me to never open the doors and look in there, or tell you I knew the chains were there."

More amazement on Mary's part, but she was cool, and the little girl went on again: "I told father what Auntie Alice had said, and then he said that was what he wanted to do, was to throw your chains away—though he said they weren't really chains at all—just a paper. He said it was all right for me to open the—sec'tary" (that was a very troublesome word) "if he told me to, and so I did—but I just looked back at him on his bed every minute, I was so scared!"

Mary held her close.

"He told me it must be a secret just for him and me, unless I saw you troubled some time." She paused a moment, and then hurried on excitedly: "I nearly forgot!

After father went away, and Auntie Alice and everybody went away, but you and me, Mr. Stillwell came here one morning, and he and I put a paper back in the tin box. Mr. Stillwell said it was a nice paper, not an ugly one like the other, and so I didn't mind putting it in a bit. He said, too, for me to do just what father had told me, and that if I didn't ever see you troubled like father said, that you would find the paper, yourself, soon."

Mary put the child down, her hands trembling, and at once opened the old secretary door, taking out the tin box that had held family papers of any importance for two generations.

Sure enough there lay a fresh paper! Libbie Lee crowded close to see. "That's it," she cried.

Mary opened the paper and a small Barringer bank book, showing a goodly amount on deposit in her name was revealed, while the paper itself proved to be a receipt for the full amount of a mortgage on the brown

cottage! The old tyrant which had so long threatened and menaced was indeed really gone forever! A needless household skeleton in actual presence it had been, but when the mortgage deed was executed, Mr. Halsey had insisted on retaining a copy which should show payments and corresponding receipts. Thus from the old secretary it had constantly reached out a sinister hand and gripped her with its fetters.

But now it was gone—the family obligation had been met—she might have accepted Winthrope! She might yet accept him, but—

Her emotions were many.

It was like Elwood—like a Halsey—to want to do the right thing, but not to be caught at it! To make reparation for a fault, but not to acknowledge it! Once having taken a position on a matter, it was like moving one of the granite hills to stir a Halsey from it, even though he realized later that the position was wrong!

Then she took thought of herself—"I will

wring that stubborn thing out of me!"

Yes, she would—but it was too late to bring her happiness! She had let it turn Winthrope away from her! The fact was firmly fixed in her mind by now that Winthrope Arnold had transferred his affection of so many long years, from herself to her sister Alice—to this Alice who was walking, and quite herself once more!

Thus there came a moment of tragic inner turmoil and intense suffering as she stood holding the paper and the little bank book in her hands. Then her eyes fell upon the little girl looking up at her, still excited and uncertain. She stooped and took the child in her arms, folding her close.

"That was a lovely thing you and father did. I am so glad the old chains are gone, and that you and father took them away for me! Now, you and I will just keep the secret between us, and not tell anybody else, except Auntie Alice, and I will tell her when I think best. You see we are a family, now, and families have things that they love to

keep just among themselves—like birds in a nest. They don't mind people looking at them, and seeing where they live, but they don't want folks to come to their nest and find out their family secrets!"

In their kindergarten methods Libbie Lee had learned all about the ways of birds. So the secret had passed from an awesome thing to something nice and natural.

Later Mary talked over the matter with Mr. Stillwell, and he said that Elwood told him that was what he came back home for. He wanted to pay off the mortgage entirely, returning the money Mary had paid on it, and the amount deposited in her name was intended to more than cover this. He had not meant to trouble her and Alice, but was going to get into the house at night as he used to when a boy, take the old copy of the mortgage and then mail back the receipt and bank-book anonymously. Staunch old family principles had found generous growth in Elwood.

For Mary this whole matter brought

much brooding thought during the two days that must pass before Alice was with them again. But, in spite of this, those two days passed rapidly. The cottage was freshly furnished for the wanderer's return. Maggie Oldham was there to help, and things went well, so that Mary looked it over with practical satisfaction (and an inward cry for steadiness) as she turned the key in the door, took Libbie Lee's hand and went to meet the train on which Alice—and, perhaps Winthrope, too, was to come. Nothing had been said as to whether he was to come or not. She prayed that he would not! She would like a chance to take things in sections, if she might!

Calling to Libbie Lee, who was dancing about the yard in the joyful thought of seeing Auntie Alice once more, she hurried to the car, though they had abundant time at their disposal.

What a strange experience it is to see one beloved and long given over to helplessness, come walking forth in newness of life! As

though, indeed, one had come from the dead! Even Libbie Lee felt the awe of it, as Alice stepped from the train and stood a moment in the vestibule, smiling down at them!

Then Winthrope appeared and helped her down the steps, quite as he might have done with any healthy woman, and the nurse followed immediately behind.

The greetings were quickly over with glistening eyes for everybody but Libbie Lee, and hers were outshining them all, with no tears to mist them, while her exclamations of joy and wonder made words unnecessary from the older folks, as they made their way quickly to the blue car which stood in waiting, and started for home, leaving the trained nurse in Barringer to take the next train back to New York, as she was no longer needed.

There came another speechless moment when Alice stepped into the brown cottage for the first time in more than ten years! How Alice and Mary would ever have passed those first few moments they did not

know, had it not been for Libbie Lee, again. Her tongue was ready:

"Auntie Alice, what did you do with your wheel chair?" The child had fully expected to see it when Alice came, even though she knew it was no longer needed. She couldn't imagine Alice without its being somewhere in evidence!

"Why, dearie," said Alice, drawing the child close into her arms as she sat down, "you didn't think I would be bringing that old chair along when my feet and my back and, I hope, my head, are absolutely all right?"

"No—o," said Libbie Lee, doubtfully. Then, with the insistent curiosity of children, she persisted: "But what did you do with it?"

In her little mind it had been too much a part of Alice to be carelessly thrown aside.

Understanding, at last, in an intuitive way Alice Halsey had, she said earnestly: "I will tell you what I did with it. I had it sent to a hospital, where lots of sick folks

go, so that if anybody needed it at any time, it would be right there for them to get into and ride around as I used to do."

This was perfectly satisfactory, and by this time the older folks had fallen into natural ways.

CHAPTER XXIV

A VICTOR

Two days passed with Winthrope again installed at Sam and Maggie Oldham's, but spending his time in the brown cottage.

Winthrope and Alice seemed on easy terms of intimacy, to say the least. There was ready response, quick understanding and sympathy between them. And, as Alice went about the house with the old grace of movement (which the wheel chair could never quite obliterate) fully restored, and clad, as she was always in modern, attractive raiment, Mary really could not see how Winthrope could keep from falling in love with her! So her premonitions were stoutly confirmed by observation. The two had, naturally, much in common with the six months of close association and incidents of travel to talk over.

A story of tragedy of the heart may be very harrowing in print, but usually in real life the victim goes about her accustomed ways of life with little or no evidence to mark her manner. So Mary, after her summer of disquiet, and of activity for others, having acquired some of the poise of courageous living, met her climax with no show of white feathers.

When Alice and Winthrope talked of interesting things seen and heard, and she and Libbie Lee had listened with proper show of interest, Mary turned to Libbie Lee, gayly:

"They think we have had no fun at all, do they not, little girl? Well, we will just tell them we have! Didn't we go through the Mohawk Trail, and see the prettiest mountains and valleys, and Indian relics and wonders of all sorts? And then down to old Plymouth, and over to Concord?"

Libbie Lee's eyes sparkled and she added, breathlessly, her happy childish recollections of the summer till Winthrope seized

her and swung her to his shoulder in laughing applause; then assured her that next time there was any traveling done, she was going to be one of the party!

Could there be needed any further confirmation of Mary's worst fears! Alice and Winthrope would leave for the west, ere long, and take Libbie Lee with them!

It was a most wearing undercurrent to be carrying about with cheerful face and manner, and yet the old decree that "the bruised reed He will not break and the smoking flax He will not quench," holds good. And so it was at the moment when Mary felt endurance was no longer possible—when she cried out from her soul in prayer that Winthrope might go away—if for only a few days that she might have respite and hear the story from Alice alone—when Winthrope said to her on the afternoon of the second day, as they stood a moment together:

"Mary, may I have a talk with you, alone?"

The reed then was even more deeply bruised and the flax gave but a faint flicker, for of course, he was going to tell her the story of Alice and himself!

Her lips moved, without volition, in the one word—"Certainly."

"Good!" he returned, for the stress she was under by this time was plainly perceptible to his keen eyes, and he responded with the commonplace heartiness of one business man to another.

After this he went on casually, "Alice wants to go over and show herself to the Stillwells; she can take Libbie Lee in the car, and that will give us the opportunity we want."

"Not *we!* Oh, no!" Mary's heart cried again, but her lips were silent.

It was only a few moments later that Alice and Libbie Lee were started off on their trip, a few moments of natural activity that were most welcome to Mary; and then, she and Winthrope sat alone in the little brown cottage as they had before.

Winthrope Arnold did not know the word delay. He always plunged at once to the heart of things.

"Mary, I have come again, after six more months. I said I would not wait three years, and I will not, but I have given you six months to think it over. Now, what is to be my answer?"

It is a marvelous thing about that bruised reed; it does not break, and yet how does it ever bear the first new thrill of returning life? And the smoking flax, how can it endure that first bright thrust of flame again?

Perhaps Mary Halsey can tell. Her biographer cannot.

A trembling smile and a sudden rush of tears were the outward evidences in Mary's case, while she put both hands out to him and he gathered them against his breast.

"Mary, Mary, is it true—after all these years?" he whispered.

Her answer seemed entirely satisfactory.

After a time, Winthrope turned to her

"'NOW, WHAT IS TO BE MY ANSWER?'"

with a note of triumph in his voice, and the light of a conqueror in his eyes:

"Mary Halsey, you are mastered at last! It has taken more than ten years to do it, but it is done!"

Mary admitted it, but the modern woman is chary of the word "master," and a sparkle of humor came to her eyes, still over-bright from tears and joy, and she added: "But I must tell you that the matter which stood in my way last spring is no longer there!"

No conqueror likes the glory of his victory dimmed, so Winthrope immediately demanded: "How? Why?"

"Because what was once in the way, is no longer in the way," she answered smilingly; and she really had not the slightest intention of telling him what had stood in the way.

But a real victor is very hard to down, and Winthrope was a man of determination. His methods were fair, under the circumstances, so need not be detailed, and

they were appealing as well; so, in the end, Mary found herself telling what she had supposed must be forever kept in the Halsey family, no matter how many husbands or wives there might be. For it was thus she had been brought up, with all the staunch unalterability of New England rearing. Family matters were strictly for family knowledge and discussion.

There had been a mortgage on the brown cottage, was the first admission—which was like confession of a family disgrace. No properly prudent people should have to mortgage their home.

"Well, couldn't I have paid it off?" he demanded.

"Yes, but it was not your obligation. Father would not have thought it right for you to do it."

"And so you would have had me—and you—wait our happiness while you spent three more years working to pay this off?"

"Yes—that was what I thought in the

spring—but, Winthrope, I must tell you that I would not feel so now, even if it were not paid off. I have dropped some more shackles since then. I have really learned better, since then, how to live without hard and fast lines to bind me down. Circumstances may alter many cases."

"Now, Mary," he exclaimed, joyfully, "you may tell me anything and I will not quarrel with you! You are the Mary I loved so long ago, with your young heart open and full of the promise of life—and I believe in my soul that you are prettier than you ever were!"

After this—and a few moments' passage—Mary said quickly, "I want to tell it all to you—the whole story of our family tragedy, which has affected you as well as us.

"You know that beautiful visit I made in the south—and how I met you—and that wonderful day at the picnic when we really found each other and were bound for life, though there were no vows or promises.

Well, I came home full of hope and joy, for I knew you would follow in time.

"It was only a few weeks after this, when a letter came to my father from his brother John over in Connecticut. This brother was a thoroughly impractical man, visionary and ineffective. The letter said he had gone deeply in debt—as it seemed to him and to us at that time. He appealed to father for help. He had the Halsey dread of debt, and felt it must be paid at once. My father agreed with him, and instantly said to Elwood, Alice and myself,—Mother had been gone many years, you know—that we must raise the money and pay the debt. Now, New England farmers do not, as a rule, get rich, and all father had been able to do was to keep us properly fed and clothed, in school, and a mortgage off the brown cottage which had been his inheritance. Alice and I each had the treat of a trip away in our girlhood; that was all the luxury we ever had. You know of mine.

"Now, to our utmost awe and dismay, father said: 'The cottage and farm must be mortgaged to pay this debt in the Halsey name.' This was final, crushing though it was, for Alice and me; but not so with Elwood. He at once demurred. He said it was not just, it was not our debt. I need not tell all that was said. It is enough for you to know that Elwood and father quarreled—Oh, it was terrible, I had never imagined such a thing! It ended with Elwood declaring he would leave and never come back if that burden was put upon the family. As father was immovable, and Elwood was twenty-one, he went—and you know the rest.

"It killed father—the quarrel, and the pressure of the debt together. It also killed Uncle John, I must say, for he was not strong and could not bear the thought of the burden he had put upon us. So he expiated fully. When Elwood was gone I knew Alice and I would have to help father lift the mortgage, and when I met you, all unex-

pectedly on the road that day, coming to our house, there was nothing for me to do, as I saw it, but send you at once away with no promise, and hope dead within my heart at seventeen.

"This would really seem enough, but is it not Shakespeare who says, 'One woe doth tread upon another's heels, so fast they follow?' They trod right upon one another's heels for me, anyway. It was not a week after father's death till Alice fell from a step-ladder and was helpless! Then, of course, I was tied here with almost no opportunity to make a living, to say nothing of paying off a mortgage. But we denied ourselves everything; I went out to sew in the village all I could, and Alice and I made children's dresses for the stores at Barringer between times. And while I did these things, I hated Elwood and I let my soul shrivel to a degree that makes me shudder now."

He folded her close in answer; then said with vigor.

"That is all over now. We must never think of it again! A new day is here, and life beckons us."

She told him then in blushing admission, how day-dreams of him had been the only thing that had lit up those past years. "They were too foolish to tell you of now, but some day I will," she said.

"There is one thing more, though, to tell you now," she went on again; "Elwood paid off that mortgage to the last farthing and more besides! But," and she smiled, "he was still too much of a Halsey to want to tell me, so he had Libbie Lee get the paper for him as he lay bed-fast, and then turned it over to Mr. Stillwell with the money to cancel it—and to much more than reimburse me for what I had already paid on it. I did not find this out until after I had given you your answer in the spring, you know."

"Yes, but I shall always remember that you had given up before you found out!"

"I shall, too," she laughed, "for I am glad

to be able to record a real victory over the Halsey stubbornness."

When Alice and Libbie Lee came in later, Winthrope met them at the door, and taking the little girl up in his arms he looked earnestly into her happy, round face; then he held her close and said:

"This is the little lady who has brought joy to us all. I think we ought to give her three cheers and a tiger! What do you say, Uncle Mary?" Not waiting for an answer, he swung the child three times high in his arms, in laughing frolic, and hugged her prodigiously for the "tiger."

Then, holding her off at arm's length, he exclaimed: "Well, I suppose I will have to be 'Aunt Winthrope' since Mary has usurped the 'Uncle.' 'Aunt Winthrope,' and 'Uncle Mary,' what a team that will be!"

To Libbie Lee all this meant fun, and fun was always in order, but to Alice it told a happy story, which a glance into Mary's face confirmed.

Winthrope Arnold, being a man who did not know the word delay, wanted the wedding ceremony immediately. "I would like to get my family together as soon as possible," he put it a little later to Mary and Alice, together, with a lively twinkle in his eyes.

"Your family," laughed Alice, inquiringly.

"Of course—my family of four," he returned.

"Now, Winthrope, that is most gracious of you to include me; but while we were west I became greatly interested in the many things open to women now. I am sure there are things I can do; in fact, I made some plans with a woman in business out there, which I can take up at once. I have been useless long enough. You can both understand how I want to do something, now," she appealed.

But there was vigorous protest from both Winthrope and Mary; so a compromise was finally reached, with Alice agreeing to

attempt nothing for at least a year, in order to give her time to fully establish health and strength.

"Not being a Halsey, Alice, but belonging wholly to dear, amiable mother, you can do lovely things people want you to, without being dragged through fire and brimstone as I have to be," laughed Mary through her tears, as she kissed her sister, then whispered, "I just couldn't live without you!" and ran into her own room for a moment.

With one matter settled, Winthrope was eager for full determination of all his affairs, so he called, "Mary, we need you! this thing is not all planned yet—I want that date, you know!"

"I am so meek I don't know myself!" laughed Mary, appearing at the sitting room door again. "I suspect I will do about as you say."

"Then to-morrow is the date!"

"Oh, that will never do!" cried Alice. "I believe both of you have lost your equilib-

rium! If we are going to have a wedding in the brown cottage, there must be a little fuss over it! I don't think there was ever a wedding here. The place has gone from father to son for three generations, and the weddings have all been somewhere else. Give us a few days, anyway, Winthrope," she pleaded. Then, as Winthrope looked unyielding, she turned to Libbie Lee, who did not understand at all what was going on, but knew it was something very important, therefore exciting, and was standing by, all attention. Alice reached out and drew her close:

"Libbie Lee, don't you want a wedding here?"

"Oh, it would be lovely! Yours, Auntie Alice?"

"No, Winthrope's and Uncle Mary's!"

Her astonishment was too great for words at first. Then she said, "That will be beautiful! And will Uncle Mary wear a long white dress and a veil and flowers?" she ended excitedly.

"I hope so," answered Alice, smiling, but exceedingly doubtful.

"No," came from the bridegroom-to-be, emphatically; and Mary appeared at the door long enough to add her decided, "No!"

It was all, apparently, at last settled with a little compromising from different quarters: Winthrope agreeing on a date the following week, which would give time to make it a sort of real wedding, even if the bride wouldn't wear orange blossoms and a veil —which just suited the groom.

CHAPTER XXV

A TOWN WEDDING

But they had reckoned without the town! The Stillwells had been promptly told. All the family went over, in fact, after tea in the car to tell them, and to make some plans. (Before the evening was half over Stanley confided to Libbie Lee that Winthrope Arnold was a good sort, which sounded splendid to Libbie Lee.)

Then the Stillwells were allowed to tell the townspeople. "I want them to be happy with me," Mary had said to him; adding, "especially the children."

It was a day later that the minister came to the brown cottage in the early morning and found Mary and Winthrope talking over some matters—discussing, in reality, the question as to who should pay for the trousseau, and Mary showing decided firm-

ness as she smilingly said she would buy and pay for her own trousseau! That the terms with her old "employer" did not include trousseau—all the while remembering in grateful, loving pride, the sum which Elwood had so generously refunded, and which with fine New England justice she meant to divide equally between Alice and herself.

Mr. Stillwell, catching some of the discussion, said heartily, "Mary, you are right!"

And Winthrope was vanquished. Then the old man sat down, and for a few moments he did not speak, while a most apologetic look appeared on his face, as his gaze rested on the floor. Finally, he lifted his head and smiled whimsically at Mary.

"Mary, child, the town wants a church wedding!"

A sharp retort "What has the town to do with it?" rose even to the new, "meek" Mary's lips. But she, too, waited a mo-

ment; then she said in a puzzled way, "Why?"

Winthrope was watching her, ready to put in his protest if she showed any sign of agreeing. But the minister was prompt with his reason:

"Because the town loves you, Uncle Mary! You have won the ardent devotion of every child here by the beautiful service you have rendered them; and when anybody wins the children of a town, the whole place is won. They love you, and they want to see you married, and I think every little girl wants to be your flower girl, and every boy your page!"

This brought a laugh all round, and Winthrope cried impulsively, "We will have a church wedding, Mary, and have every last one of them for flower girls and pages! What do you say?"

"Why, Winthrope, nobody ever heard of such a thing!" Mary protested in laughing bewilderment.

"What does that matter?" said both men

at once. And Winthrope went on, "I had not thought of it, but of course they love you, and we will just give them all the church wedding they want!"

Mary looked at him in mock despair, then said, "Well, I have promised not to be a Halsey any more, haven't I? And I have been very meek, so far, in this matter, so I will do what you want me to—you, Winthrope, and Mr. Stillwell."

So there was such a wedding as never was! With Mary in a white wedding gown of simple materials, but beautiful and becoming; and a long veil which hid her face as she went up the aisle, following Alice, who as maid of honor was also dressed simply, in a lovely, becoming pink! But the unusual part was the small host of flower girls and pages, with Stanley and Libbie Lee leading, each girl dressed in a beautiful gown just from New York, and each boy in a spanking new suit from the same metropolis! For, hadn't Mary measured them all carefully and lovingly, and

then hadn't Winthrope Arnold had the joy of his life in a trip down to the great city, where he bought every single little garment, of the finest texture and the latest cut!

And rose petals! The aisles were so thick with them that it was like a fairy-land carpet in its color and fragrance. Then the church was a bower of beauty, planned and executed by a metropolitan florist; and it was packed full of people even to every inch of standing room!

CHAPTER XXVI

REVELATION

It was a mild, early November day and a lounger sat on the hotel veranda at Barringer. A man of medium size and good address was hurrying from the lobby along the veranda to the steps, when the lounger called out to him:

"Hey, stranger, I want to tell you something!"

The man halted reluctantly a moment.

"Sophie Stoneham's been telling me about Mary Halsey's wedding, and, they say she had the biggest doings that Sunfield ever saw!"

"Is that so?" smiled the stranger.

And then something seemed to come to the lounger by electricity, telepathy or some

such modern method: "Say! be you the man that married her?"

"I should guess so!" laughed back the stranger as he hurried down the steps.

THE END

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